

The Wise One

Book One: Becoming

Arc One

Nature, Nurture, and Long History

Bright eyes

Looking fresh on the world

So quickly disappointed

Dark eyes

Looking out with jealousy

Never satiated

Young lives

Starting out with prejudice

Wanting tradition

Careful hands

Shape them with love and power

They are becoming

“You live and learn. At any rate, you live.” Douglas Adams

Chapter One

The day he slipped through the bars and left the prison, he knew what he had to do.

It wasn't a hard choice, really. There were only two roads open to him, and both likely ended in being recaptured and returned to Azkaban. But which one was the better option? To go after Peter . . . he longed for that meeting, to stand in front of the man and watch his face turn from confidence to fear, that would be so good. When he transformed, his mouth salivated and his spotted tongue hung out with the thrill that went through him, the idea of the hunt, and the capture. Oh, the capture. Killing Peter would be the culmination, the sweet fulfillment of all his years of brooding in that prison cell. Going mad—going so mad.

In the back of his mind, he always knew that he was being driven mad. Revenge was what had kept him going, when he hadn't been able to remain in his dog form. But he'd become sub-human, the last few years. He knew it, although his heart was too dead to grasp that significance. His mind was operating on the level of instinct and the drive for vengeance, and nothing more than that was working now. His spirit, if he still had one, was rusty and useless, and he was less than a man.

And so this was what he must do.

Peter would be hard to find, he knew. Peter was a rat. Peter could be living in a sewer and awaiting the day when he could finally come out into the open with his true allegiances. It would be next to impossible to track him down—although he was sure his canine nose was up to the task. Much easier to find the boy. James and Lily's boy would be easy to locate. There had to be a thousand wizards and witches, or more, that knew where little Harry was living—the boy was famous, after all. Even in prison, he'd heard the tones of awe or anger in which Harry Potter's name was spoken. He could track him down easily, provided he could stay out of sight. And then maybe . . .

Maybe seeing the boy would stir those embers of his soul.

If not, he didn't know how long he could go on this way. Could be that he'd finally escaped prison just to race to Peter, kill him, and die

himself in that struggle. As he loped down the deserted country lane he'd chosen to travel, he wondered if the clattering rocks under his feet were the sound of his own death rattle.

"Whatchoo fink, Phil?"

"I don't think anything. Not my job."

"Course not, nobody ever got paid to."

"Especially not you," Phil said grumpily.

"Fine. Only I was finkin', how he got out."

"Well, nobody knows, do they?"

"You ever been to Azkaban, Phil?"

"No, thank Merlin."

"Me, neither," the stockier man said thoughtfully. "Maybe it ain't so hard to break out."

"Which is why he's the only one to ever do it, then, is it?" Phil asked scathingly, flicking the ashes from his cigarette.

"Well, it's a mystery, then. But I was finkin' too, where 'e might be goin'."

"He's on his way to the Potter boy, where else?"

"I know that. But who knows where the boy is, eh?"

"People ranking higher than us, Robbie," Phil said in exasperation.

This conversation was proving more useless all the time, but still he waited. He waited to see what the two men on their smoke break might inadvertently say, to give him some clue as to the boy's whereabouts. James' parents were dead, so obviously the boy hadn't gone to them. Who else might have taken him in? Dumbledore was

close to them at that point. He simultaneously hoped and feared that it would be Remus who had the boy. He hadn't heard a word yet about Remus.

"Yeah, but you're an Auror, ain't you? You know somefin'."

"I know he's in Surrey," Phil told Robbie grudgingly.

He let out a quiet breath. Not too loud, that attracted the . . . never mind. There were no dementors here. At least not yet. He was still a step ahead of all of them. And now here he was in London, listening in on the conversation of two hapless Ministry employees discussing the recent events in their world. He was almost proud of himself for sparking such a massive upheaval of the cumbersome Ministry procedure—or he would be, if he had the energy. Catching a wounded animal or two in his dog form was one thing, but he hadn't had a decent meal or a full night's sleep in two weeks. Well, in years, really, but this was the first time he'd had to do anything other than sit in his prison cell and fight for control of his mind. He was exhausted. Now, he felt what little adrenaline could spark its feeble path through him shooting along his nerves. Surrey. That wasn't so far, now.

"How?" Robbie pressed.

"Because we've got people stationed in Surrey, you dolt. We're not all just combing the country miles, you know. We have some defensive positions around the boy."

"But not you," Robbie pointed out, taking a deep drag on his cigarette to show his satisfaction for gaining the brief upper hand against his vastly more intelligent coworker.

"Obviously not," Phil said, sounding almost prim. "I've been demoted to paper-pusher."

"Still, you fightin' that old bag must have been a thing to see," Robbie chuckled. "With her screamin' 'it weren't me! it weren't me!' all the time."

That sounded like an interesting story, but he wouldn't get to hear it. Phil dropped the butt of his smoke on the pavement and ground it out with his heel, his face dark. "Back to work, Robbie."

"All right, all right, I'm comin'," Robbie said, still chuckling. "Not like the toilets won't keep for a bit."

And they went back through the breakroom door. That was that, he thought. The most information he was likely to get by the eavesdropping-in-side-alleys method. Still, Surrey was something. It wasn't like wizards didn't stick out like a sore thumb. He'd be able to locate them quickly, and with any luck, they'd be stationed around the boy in a ring, and he could just slip between them and find the center of that ring.

It was his only hope now.

Sweet Merlin's grace. He'd forgotten about Lily's sister.

What a disgusting family, he thought, crouching in the perfectly-trimmed flower-bushes outside their window. The picture-perfect family with the neat yard and the freshly-painted house and the man who went to work and came home for dinner every night and praised his son just for existing. It was almost enough to make one sick. He hadn't quite got over being sickened by how lax the Aurors surrounding this neighborhood were, and now he was forced to watch Lily's sister coo and fuss over her fat little dumpling of a son. Lily was related to these people? Really?

He hadn't yet caught a glimpse of the boy he wanted to see. Maybe he wasn't home. Maybe he was at a sleep-over at a friend's house or something. Didn't boys like to do that kind of thing? He certainly wasn't sitting down at the dinner table with the rest of the family.

The little boy—Dudley, his name was, also called Diddydums, apparently—looked expectantly at his ugly, no-neck father and said something he couldn't quite catch through the window. The man's face broke out into a wide smile, and he nodded.

“Right,” he said in a big, booming voice, and got back up from the table. Vernon left the room, and he had to run around the outside of the house to the window by the front door to find a view of what was happening. Was it the boy, where was the boy?

“Out you come, then,” Vernon was saying . . . to the door of the little cupboard under the stairs. He flicked some kind of lock on the door and opened it. “You get started clearing up the dishes while we’re eating, and you’ll have not a bite of it. And next time your aunt cuts your hair, it’ll stay cut, won’t it boy?” he finished on a growl.

It raised the hackles on the back of his neck, and he stared in anticipation. He’d been wanting so badly to see the boy, but if Harry Potter was what was in that closet . . .

Out stumbled the boy. The tousled black hair hung low over the pinched little face that was mostly taken up with glasses and an enormous scar on his forehead. He was swimming in his clothes, and he looked far too tiny to be a boy of the indestructible variety he seemed to remember being in his own childhood.

“Yes, Uncle Vernon,” the boy said in a cowed little voice, and shuffled down the hall.

And his heart woke up. It woke up angry.

When the boy stepped out the back door to dump the remains of the dinner salad on the little compost pile, that was his chance. But he had planned it carefully. He didn’t want to frighten the boy—Merlin only knew what a frightened boy wizard who hadn’t discovered his powers might do by accident. And he was working hard to keep his anger against the Dursleys in check. He hadn’t grown any more fond of them in the last half hour, but he needed to stay under control. Control was what he had in all the world, his greatest accomplishment in his life. He’d maintained it all through Azkaban, after realizing the loss of it was what had landed him in that prison, and he’d kept going so carefully the last few weeks. Never succumbing to his need for revenge, just seeking out the boy to regain his humanity, if he could.

He slunk forward, knowing his huge black shape would startle the boy but hoping he wouldn't react in fear too quickly, as his size couldn't be helped at this point. He would remain in dog form until the boy trusted him enough not to run screaming when he transformed. He kept his eyes on the food the boy was dumping out, trying to convince him that he was just a stray dog interested in a meal. The boy froze, and stared at him, his eyes wide and brilliantly green behind the glasses.

Lily . . . he thought. But it was James that Harry looked like. So much like James that it was incredible. He'd been having flashbacks to their first meeting on the Hogwarts Express since first laying his eyes on the boy, and he had to shake off yet another memory. No time for reminiscing just now. The boy was still staring at him, unmoving and frightened.

He made a little whining noise and slunk forward a few more steps, licking his purple-red lips and trying not to show the size and sharpness of his teeth. He whined again, looking at the salad. It wasn't entirely an act, come to think of it. How long was it since he'd had fresh vegetables? It was a wonder he had any teeth. He'd known it was time to affect an escape when the first one had fallen out and he'd seen how yellow it was. The greens spilling out onto the ground looked delicious, and it made no sense to throw good food away. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew his mother never would have stood for leftovers and at some point in his life, neither would he . . . but that was a long time ago, now. Still, he was amazed that there were leftovers, but maybe the little dumpling didn't eat his vegetables.

"Dogs don't eat salad," the boy said, his voice a little shaky.

He whined again, proving the boy wrong. He knew that even in this form, with thick black fur covering him, his ribs were visible enough to count. He was dirty and starving and ragged, dog and man together.

"Aunt Petunia says I'm not allowed to feed strays," he said, and cast a frightened glance at the back door.

A boy more afraid of his family than a huge feral animal either had something wrong with him or had a seriously dysfunctional family. He was starting to see it was the latter, and found he could still feel pity. James and Lily's son should be a little princeling, and here he was a kitchen boy scraping the dishes clean like a house elf. He gave up on the idea of food and simply padded up to the boy and rubbed his head slowly against his arm. He, too, was skinny and wretched-looking in his baggy clothes and pale skin. Perhaps they were more kindred than he'd first imagined. How was it that no one knew about this, he thought? Didn't Dumbledore know? Didn't Remus? Why would they allow this to happen to him?

The boy was shocked for a moment at the touch, then laughed a little and sat down on the stoop, the dinner leavings half-forgotten at his side. He scratched behind the tufted, pointed, black ears gingerly, watching for signs of impending attack. None were forthcoming, as the dog was currently fighting tears at how good it felt simply to be touched by another human being.

"My name is Harry," he confided in the dog. "Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon just call me 'boy,' mostly, and Dudley calls me things like 'stupid,' but I like to be called Harry Potter. My parents were James and Lily Potter, and they named me Harry. Aunt Petunia says it's such a common name, like it's bad or something. I think I would like to be common, but I don't think I am. My teachers say I'm strange."

He moved his hand down to scratch under the big black chin, which also felt amazing.

"I didn't know it was so easy to talk to dogs," the boy said in wonderment. "I could tell you anything. I'm eight years old, and I sleep in the cupboard under the stairs. I don't like it in there. There's spiders and I don't have a light. Uncle Vernon put a lock on it so I can't come out when I'm being punished."

His hand stroked over the furry black head and along the neck.

"I got punished today for my hair. It's so shaggy. Aunt Petunia tried to cut it and it grew back. I didn't do it on purpose, but I still didn't get

anything to eat. I don't know why things like that always happen to me. They always act like it's my fault."

His hand stroked along the spine of the great beast before him, standing up to do so. He couldn't reach while sitting down, but he laughed to see how much the dog was enjoying it.

"You're so big," he said with awe. "I didn't know dogs got so big. But you're nice. Did you ever have a house to live in? I wonder if you have an owner. Maybe they gave you a name. I guess you can't tell me, though. I could give you a new name. I don't think they would let me keep you, though. Aunt Petunia will say you're dirty and disgusting, and Uncle Vernon will say you'd eat us out of house and home. Dudley will say you're just a stupid dog, and who'd want a stupid old dog, anyway?" Harry grinned down at him, and the smile was just like James. "I want to name you, anyway. I'll find some food for you when I can, if you come back." The little hand stroked through the fur, the boy enjoying the feel of it even though it was filthy and matted. He'd never had a pet before.

"I don't know any good names for a dog. I don't know any good names at all. I guess I'll have to think about it. Maybe I could call you James, just for now. I always liked my dad's name."

He whined deep in his throat, the only way he could communicate how much Harry's pain hurt him, how much of that pain he shared. He didn't want to transform now, not yet. Harry wouldn't be ready for that kind of thing. He didn't even know about magic, so far as he could tell. But he didn't think the boy would run screaming, anyway—he wasn't that kind of boy, and besides, who would he run to?

"Here," Harry said, pushing the bowl of salad forward. "You can have this, and I'll see if I can get anything else. I'll have to be really careful though, or Uncle Vernon will kill me."

As Harry went back into the house, the voice of his aunt rose shrilly from another room.

"Haven't you finished those dishes yet?"

“Almost, Aunt Petunia!” the boy answered.

He gulped the leftovers down in one bite and settled down on the back stoop to wait to see if Harry would be able to get him anything else. He resolved to share it, whatever it was. Harry hadn’t eaten, either. He waited while dusk turned into twilight, and then the back door swung silently open, and Harry traipsed out, looking crafty and scared. He had something tucked under his arm, and something in each hand.

“Here,” he whispered, holding out both hands carefully so as not to lose the dark shape under his arm. “This is bacon, but I didn’t dare cook it. It’s for breakfast tomorrow, so I only took my part. This is just bread, I don’t know if you’ll eat it.”

He felt no qualms about scarfing all the uncooked bacon, as Harry wouldn’t be able to eat that anyway, but he pretended to turn up his nose at the sliced bread, waiting expectantly for Harry to eat it. Harry turned it over in his hands and said doubtfully,

“I guess if you don’t want it . . .”

The black nose nudged him, and he giggled. “That’s cold,” he scolded, shoving the bread into his mouth. He pulled the object out from under his arm. “I thought you’d be cold. I got you a blanket.”

He spread the blanket out in the grass next to the stoop.

“Do dogs like blankets?”

He dropped himself onto the blanket and burrowed his nose—which was indeed cold—into it. He hoped that was answer enough. He was amazed by the amount of kindness Harry seemed to have stored up in himself. Another few years, and most of it would be smothered out by these awful people. They spent a comfortable fifteen minutes enjoying the food in their bellies and the warmth of each other’s company, and then Harry regretfully snuck back inside. He had to get back into his cupboard before they discovered him missing, or there would be no food tomorrow, either.

He fell asleep that night more quickly than he had in years and slept so soundly the night passed without a single dream to mar it.

Chapter Two

He wondered if the blanket had been discovered missing, or if Harry would be in trouble when it was. He supposed there wasn't really any way for the poor boy to argue his cousin had done it. Dudley was not exactly the type to offer kindness to stray dogs. He got up from the blanket, which was a little wet with dew, regretful but wanting to keep Harry out of trouble. He shook it out thoroughly and folded it up as neatly as he knew how—his fingers were clumsy with the idea of trying to be domestic. He wondered if he ought to leave, go outside the circle of Aurors that were “protecting” Harry from him. It might be that part of their routine was to come by the house regularly, and he'd be caught if they were.

The day was just beginning, the sky alight with dawn, and he judged it to be about six o'clock. He'd been seeing dawn out in the open for a few weeks now, but the beauty of it still felt new and fresh. He sat on the stoop and enjoyed it for a moment. He was starting to feel almost human again.

The back door opened, and a little boy's voice chattering with excitement spoke up behind him,

“Uncle Vernon's going to work early and he's stopping at a bakery for breakfast so here's his share . . . oh!”

He jumped up and spun around wildly to see Harry staring up at him with fright and shock. Oh, damn.

“Who are you?” Harry asked in a small, shaky voice.

Trying to keep his composure, he said, “You can call me James if you really want, but my name is actually Sirius.”

“Oh, wow.”

“How do you do it, then?” Harry asked him when he'd calmed down enough to listen, his voice surprisingly not frightened. “Is it a magic trick?”

Sirius sank slowly back down on the stoop and smiled wryly. "It's no trick, but it's magic, all right."

"Magic's not real," Harry scoffed.

"You don't think so?"

"No."

"So you think that dog ran off and I just happened to wander into your backyard after that?"

"Yes," the boy said bravely, looking confused.

Sirius smiled, surprised that he could. He'd sort of thought he'd lost the ability. "Then how did the blanket get folded?"

The boy stared at the blanket for a moment, then back at the ragged man in desperate need of a shave and haircut. "Well, what are you doing here?"

"Looking for you," he said gravely. He hadn't meant to surprise Harry with his human form so quickly, but now that he had, he supposed the rest of the story couldn't be helped.

"Why?" the boy asked, taking a step back toward the door. As if these Muggles could offer him protection from Sirius, which was the most laughable idea he'd heard in a very long time, indeed.

"Don't you know who I am? Sirius Black?"

"No."

"They didn't tell you about how Voldemort found your house then, did they?"

"What?"

"To kill your parents."

“Somebody killed my parents?” the boy whispered, looking frightened and bewildered. “I thought they had a car accident.”

Sirius was aghast at the idea, but after all that he’d seen yesterday, it honestly didn’t surprise him that the boy was so clueless about his upbringing. He tried to keep it simple. The boy was eight years old, after all.

“They didn’t, though. I guess they thought you were too young to know.” Likely trying to keep him away from magic entirely, for Merlin knows what reason. “Your parents got murdered by a very evil man. They were hiding from him, and no one was supposed to know where they were, except their best friend. But the evil man found them, and so everybody knew that their friend told him, and that their friend was really an evil man, too.”

Harry frowned, and looked angry. “If he was their friend . . .”

“But he didn’t,” Sirius said softly, his voice tinged with anger as well. But he was too weary, and it had been too long, and this boy didn’t need to see that side of him just yet. God, how was he to explain all this, to such a young child?

“Their friend didn’t do it. It was a different friend of theirs, in fact. Their best friend knew that the evil man would come looking for him to find out where they were hiding, so he told them not to tell him about it. He said tell someone else, and it was the biggest mistake he ever made. The person they told about their hiding place was the one who told the evil man where to find them, so he could kill them. But everyone thought it was their best friend who did it, and they put him in prison for it.”

“That was wrong. Didn’t he tell them he didn’t do it?”

Sirius was amazed at how calm the boy could be about it, how logical. “Yes, but there was no evidence. He was so shocked and sad about what happened that he didn’t know what to do or how to prove he was innocent. So he had to go to prison for a long time. For seven years.”

Harry stared at him, stared at the tattered remains of his prison uniform and his matted hair and yellowed teeth. Sirius could almost see the connections shaping up in his mind.

"That's you," the boy said. "You were in prison. So you're their friend, the one who didn't do it."

"That's right," Sirius said . . . and almost was able to feel hope.

"Did you run away from the prison?"

"Yes. I'm supposed to be in there, still. But I wanted to come find you and see if you were okay. I loved your parents very much, and I had to see if their little boy was safe."

"But why?"

Merlin knows. "Because they wanted me to take care of their son, if anything ever happened to them. I'm your godfather."

"Are there people looking for you? I heard on the news about a man who escaped from jail and they wanted to find him and make him go back. They said he was dangerous."

"Probably me," Sirius agreed. "Yes, if they ever find me, I'll be put back in Azkaban—that's the name of the prison—maybe forever. So I have to find that rotten man who told your parents' secret, and soon, so I can make him tell the truth. People think I killed him, you know. That stupid man who did that, they think I killed him because I was evil and I wanted to kill everyone. But he's just hiding, he's not dead. I know it. And I'm going to force him to tell everyone what really happened."

"But what if they catch you before you find him?"

"I don't know."

"I don't want you to get caught," Harry said firmly.

"You don't?"

“No. I think you’re brave. You came a long way to find me, and you told the truth even if nobody believed you. I like you.”

Sirius gaped at the boy. Amazing. Harry Potter was an amazing child.

“I think you should run away some more. Farther away, where they can’t find you. So you can have a house and go to work like normal people. You shouldn’t have to go to jail.”

“You don’t want me to see you anymore?”

Harry looked troubled by this. “I could go with you.”

“I’d have to go very far away to hide from them. Maybe even leave England.”

Harry looked even more troubled. “I’d be scared. But if my parents wanted me to go with you, I would. If you were best friends, they’d want me to go with you. I don’t think Aunt Petunia even liked them, and they were real family. Maybe friends are better. I could be your friend.”

Sirius smiled, even though it felt like his heart was breaking with how beautiful this child was and how much faith and trust still might exist in this world. And he thought about it. Taking Harry, going as far as he could go. Leaving it all behind. What was Peter but a simple rat that didn’t deserve so much effort? And Remus . . . well, Remus had never exactly dropped in at Azkaban to hear his side of the story, no matter that they were longtime friends who’d sworn to the same cause and should have bonded even closer in their grief over losing James and Lily. Those two were the only things holding Sirius here, but for this boy.

Maybe it was just that he was a coward. Maybe he couldn’t really handle seeking out Peter, trying to explain to Remus. But maybe he knew, deep down, that Harry would be more important to James than revenge.

“You really want to go with me?”

"You've got magic," Harry said slowly. "You wouldn't punish me if my hair grew too much, would you?"

Sirius smiled, and placed his hand, softly and carefully, on the boy's head. "No, I wouldn't."

"Or if I accidentally got onto the roof when the bullies at school were chasing me?"

"If there were bullies chasing you at school, I'd blister their arses and send them home crying to their mothers."

Harry grinned, and his small fingers slipped into Sirius' calloused, cracked, and torn hand. "Okay. Where are we going?"

"What do you mean, you can't find him?"

"I mean, I'm outside their house, and I don't see him," the rabbit said with alarm. "I haven't seen him in hours. He was in the house with his aunt and uncle, and then he didn't come out when they left. I went in the house, and I couldn't find him. I know he went inside, and I know he didn't come out, so he should still be in there."

He looked down at the rabbit gravely, feeling his heart thump with fear and a jolt of energy. "Thank you, Hector," he said calmly. He'd only been able to place one of the old Order members on the Auror squad in Surrey, but at least there was one person communicating with him.

"What are we going to do, sir?"

"I will handle it myself. Thank you, Hector," he repeated.

The rabbit Patronus winked out of existence, and he stood up from his desk carefully. Was he really getting so old? He had to be, this rather extraordinary beard of his was almost completely white, now. It had been seven years since he'd been in a situation anything like this. And now it was starting again.

He sent his own Patronus straying across the castle until it lighted on the person he needed.

“Minerva?”

“Albus, what is it? Have they found Black?”

“No, but I fear something has happened. Hector reports being unable to locate the boy.”

Minerva stuttered over that with surprise.

“I am going to investigate, Minerva. Please keep an eye on the students while I am away.”

“Of course,” she said, sounding affronted. “Please give me any news as soon as possible.”

“Of course,” he replied in that same affronted tone. Then they both chuckled, albeit weakly through their anxiety, and Albus allowed his Patronus to dissipate. He felt he should hurry.

The large, purple-faced man with no neck glared malevolently at him from the sofa. Their relationship had not improved one whit since its inception seven years ago. His wife, at his side, had her hands clasped together and a cruel look on her horsey face. She’d never forgiven him for her childhood embarrassment, he feared. Still, it was their son that really concerned him. The roly-poly young child was currently throwing a tantrum due to not being the center of attention, and appeared to think this would do him some good. He thought it likely that these tantrums generally did garner the boy the attention he was seeking, but not today. Today, his parents were more preoccupied by the tastefully robed man with the nearly-white beard in their living room, pacing its carpeting and nearly crying with fear and anger he didn’t dare admit to.

“You’re not making any sense.”

“I told you, this bloke had come from you to get Harry, and so we let him go along, we thought we were well shut of all this nonsense . . .”

"I sent no one!" Albus nearly hissed. Very visibly, he calmed himself. "Now, why don't you start at the beginning. Tell me about this man. I want to know everything he said."

"He knocked on the door, like any decent person ought to," Petunia said, glaring at him. He himself had knocked on the door, quite like a decent person, he should think. Apparently he'd knocked in the wrong manner. "And he said he was a wizard. We didn't want to let him in, but he said he was on official business."

"Official," Vernon scoffed, and flicked his eyes over to his son. The round thing was still on the floor, using fists and heels to make its rage understood. "So we asked him what sort of official business that might be. He said he'd just spoken to you. With this hair-growing incident—"

"And who knows how he found out about that," Petunia sniffed. "You people are peeking in our windows or something, aren't you?" Not that she didn't do this to her own neighbors. It was just uncivilized when someone did it to her.

"Anyway, he says that meant the boy was going to get really violent with his . . . you know, behavior. He had to take him off so he could learn how to control himself. Said he was bringing him straight to you, in fact. Now, we said, Petunia and me, when we took him in, we said we'd not have any of this—" and suddenly his voice dropped lower "—magic bother, not in this house. But if he was going to become violent . . . we had to protect our Dudley, didn't we?"

Albus was floored by the gullibility of these people, although he strongly suspected it had more to do with a serious lack of concern for their nephew's well-being than foolishness. Well-shut of him, indeed.

"Didn't Harry seem at all concerned by this?" he asked, flabbergasted by the idea that Harry would have sat quietly while some stranger threatened to remove him from his home. "He didn't protest against going with this man?"

“Well, why would he?” Vernon asked, looking a bit disgusted with how thick this wizard apparently was. “He’s the boy’s godfather, after all.”

Albus stopped pacing, and for a moment stopped breathing. He stared at Vernon with wide eyes, then said, very softly,

“He's dead, then. Merlin help us all.”

Even the boy on the floor stopped screaming for a moment.

-O-O-O-

“Augusta! I know you’re home, woman, come to the door immediately!”

“All right!” she shouted from the other side of the thick door. “I’m coming, I’m coming, don’t get your knickers in a twist!”

She heaved the door open and stared at him. “What do you want, Dumbledore?”

“Is Neville here?”

“Of course he is,” she said indignantly. “What do you want with him?”

Albus nearly collapsed with relief. There was no reason Neville ought to have been in any danger, but he’d feared it, nonetheless. “I just wanted to be sure he was well,” he sighed.

Augusta looked down her nose at him and very pointedly did not say that he had finally gone ’round the bend. “Why oughtn’t he to be?” she asked.

Albus sighed again, knowing he hadn’t maintained his composure very well. Still, it was something she would need to know. “May I come in?”

“For a moment,” she granted.

They seated themselves in the front parlor. Young Neville came in and watched Albus with careful eyes. He was a plump, sweet-faced boy, Albus thought, and nearly despaired. Not the right sort of boy at all, was he?

"You knew Black had escaped?"

"Yes. I heard he was likely to go after the boy."

"Very likely. He has. The boy is gone."

"Gone?" she repeated, so startled that her high coif of hair trembled.

"He convinced the boy to leave the house with him. He's dead, Augusta. Harry Potter is dead. Sirius Black has finally finished the job he started seven years ago."

"Well, my goodness," the heavy-busted woman said, fanning her face with a magazine she picked up off the corner table.

"Augusta, do you understand what this means?"

Her eyes went to her grandson, and her face grew very still. Neville looked back up at her with confusion, not understanding the direction of this conversation.

"Yes," he said, feeling it was not fair that he ought to always be the bearer of bad news, but not willing to trust it to anyone else. "Neville is . . . well, he's the prophesied one, now."

"But why should he be?" Augusta said softly. "The Dark one is dead, everybody knows that."

Albus shook his head gravely, sorrowfully. "You know he isn't. He'll return, we've always known it. And now that the Potter boy is out of his way . . ."

They both looked at little Neville, who despite not understanding what they said, burst into tears and ran to cling to his grandmother's leg. He didn't like being stared at.

“He’s all we’ve got, Augusta. He must be prepared.”

Chapter Three

When Augusta started to enter the room, she got a look from the sharp blue eyes that could slice through a dragon scale, and she quickly retreated. Neville didn't even see her. She was certainly not one to be intimidated easily, but she'd never interrupted these sessions. She'd thought they'd be done by now. For Merlin's sake, the boy was only nine yet, an hour was long enough!

She sat behind the door, listening to their low conversation.

"Now you try it, Neville."

"Yes, sir," the boy said doubtfully. "But I probably won't do it very well. I'm not . . ."

"Do it just the same," the old tyrant said softly but not exceedingly patiently, she didn't think.

There was a brief flash of light around the closed door and a sigh of regret.

"Mr. Dumbledore? I don't think I can. I . . . I don't have very much magic."

"You have plenty of magic for this, Neville," the man said, firm but quiet, seeming to think that just because he wasn't shouting, Neville wouldn't see his displeasure. "It's just as I've told you: a well-turned spell is rarely the result of raw magical power and usually best served by a clever and willing mind. You mustn't let your ideas about your skills get in the way of simply doing the spell. You have plenty of talent for it, whether you believe so or not. There will be time to learn about directing it with more finesse later."

Neville made a soft noise, and Augusta knew he would be making the scrunched-nose face that he pulled when he was trying to wrap his head around a concept too big for it. Merlin knew he'd been doing enough of that since these lessons with Albus had begun.

“Now, try again, dear boy.”

“Yes, sir.”

Augusta wasn't an emotional woman by any means, and rarely had the patience to allow it in others. She'd lost just as much in the war as anyone else, and here she was trying to raise a child. Who had the time for fits of tears and faintness, the way some pure-blooded woman wanted to behave? But still . . . hearing the soft acquiescence and mild hurt in her grandson's voice made her sad, and not a little angry with the white-haired man she'd always respected. Neville was far from the perfect match to the prophecy, and yet there was no other now, just as Dumbledore had said. He was going to make her Neville into something no child ought to be. He'd expressed his need outright, and she'd been helpless to argue with him, knowing that Neville was all they had. Neville was going to be a soldier.

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“He's a child, Albus!”

“You don't honestly believe I don't know that, do you?”

It was the weariness on his face, not the question he posed, that stopped her. For she did sometimes believe he had forgotten what it was to be child like that. Oh, yes, he got daily reminders of what it was like to be a teenager, but Neville Longbottom was not a teenager. He didn't even have all his adult teeth yet. He had no comparisons, no way to judge just how much Albus was asking of him. Complex spells and theories, and wrapped around it all, that damned prophecy. Neville had never heard it for himself, poor boy. But he knew one thing above all others: he was all they had.

Albus looked exhausted, really. He'd done more today than coach the boy through another deadly serious lesson Neville could hardly grasp and relied on sheer tenacity to complete to the old man's satisfaction. Albus had been doing something political. She could always tell.

“What is it?” she asked soberly, dismayed. Wondering if he'd even tell her. She wasn't always sure he trusted her, even with how far they'd

risen in leadership at Hogwarts together. Even with how closely they'd worked to fight Voldemort's rise to power, he still kept himself to himself beyond what was merely prudent and straight into paranoia.

The lines around his mouth cut deeper grooves as he frowned. "They're pressuring Augusta to put the boy in a Ministry-staffed primary school again. As if he wasn't getting plenty of education from the tutor she hired."

"Not Fudge?" she asked, thinking of the great lengths the man usually went to to avoid Albus.

"Why not Fudge?" he asked acerbically, and sighed. "They want Neville where they can take a hand in everything."

"But Fudge thinks you're mad," she said slowly, trying to reason it out. "Wouldn't he want the Ministry distanced from Neville?"

"Fudge does, but some savvy character in that office doesn't." He started fiddling with the objects on his desk, and made a soft noise of regret. "Even if they're wrong, they'd rather have the insurance, you see. They want him to be a Ministry tool."

Knowing she was overstepping herself but unable to fully support the way Albus was going about this, she spoke up. "Is that so much worse than being your tool?"

His head jerked up and those impossibly blue eyes flashed ire. "He's a boy. He's no one's tool."

She sighed deeply, and absently ran a hand over her hair to be sure it was still in a tidy bun. She got the feeling she would be kicked out of the headmaster's office any moment, and she didn't want the students thinking anything was amiss about her. She had built such a strict reputation for herself, it simply wouldn't do to be thought of as less than invincible or, Merlin help her, human. The students were already a belligerent bunch of prattling morons so much of the time, they'd eat her alive if they saw her emotional.

"I might even help you if I could believe you meant that," she said softly.

She was already turning to go, chased out by angry words, but instead she heard a small sound behind her that froze her in her steps. It was a sound of hurt and shock. She'd actually hurt Albus Dumbledore's feelings?

"Minerva?"

"Yes?"

"I'm trying to save us all, but I'm also trying to keep that boy alive to see adulthood. I never thought Neville would be . . . I'm quite lost," he sighed. The hand he raised to his temple trembled the very slightest bit. "If I . . . you'll keep an eye on me, won't you? I won't ask for your help. I only ask that you continue to tell me I'm wrong when I am."

She cautiously turned around again. "Albus . . ."

"You're right, Minerva. I've . . . been neglecting the human side of Neville. He needs—"

"A friend or two wouldn't go amiss," she said quickly, before she lost her advantage. Merlin help the boy if he couldn't learn how to talk to people his own age before he was grown. "A little more freedom, that's all."

"Sirius Black could still be out there," he said, his eyes haunted. "We already know what he's capable of."

"I wasn't suggesting he go tearing around the countryside unsupervised."

He gave her a weak smile. "Of course."

"Actually, I think you might ask Augusta to reconsider the idea of a primary school." She raised her eyebrows at his speculative look. What? Didn't he remember how clever she could be when she

needed to? “He’ll need to learn how to handle the Ministry eventually, don’t you think? He might as well gain an ally or two as well.”

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“Come along, Neville,” his grandmother said impatiently, the large stuffed vulture on her hat bobbing dangerously as she tugged his hand. He wanted to whine that she ought to slow down, his legs were only so long at nine years old, but his grandmother wasn’t one to listen to whining. He’d just better keep up.

They dodged the myriad street vendors along Diagon Alley, trying not to make eye contact with dodgy men hawking their wares or store owners standing lazily in their doorways and smiling invitingly to potential customers. Flourish & Blotts was doing hopping business today, you could tell from the very end of the twisted alley. The line was snaking its way from the door of the bookstore halfway down to the end of the row. It was inevitable, after all; Gilderoy Lockhart was releasing a new book. Something about a Yeti, Neville thought. He supposed most boys his age weren’t paying attention to that kind of thing, but when you grew up with a couple of old ladies and your great-uncle, it was hard to ignore things like new book releases and Ministry decisions.

“Hurry up, Neville,” Grandmother said, giving him a particularly sharp tug. “I want to get to the bookstore today, after all.”

He’d started daydreaming again, he realized guiltily, and jogged a few steps to get back into their rapid pace. He hated Lockhart release days. Grandmother became quite the tyrant, as if she wasn’t already.

Augusta stormed into the bookstore like her skirt was on fire, then stopped dead, and sighed with satisfaction and relief. “Oh, good, he hasn’t made an appearance yet.”

Grandmother was likely the only one who found that a positive thing, Neville thought, looking over all the impatient, over-eager faces of the customers standing in line to get an autograph. Lockhart hadn’t shown up yet. Fashionably late, no doubt.

“Ah, Augusta Longbottom,” said the creepy old woman who worked on weekdays, sounding delighted. “Don’t tell me you’re here to get an autograph.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Hortense,” Grandmother snapped. “You’ve just put out that new book on wart and mole removal, and I want it. I hoped I’d get here a bit earlier and miss all this hullabaloo entirely, but somebody turned out to be quite the sleepyhead this morning.” Neville tried to disappear when the creepy woman eyed him with a nervous little laugh. Grandmother peered around the store anxiously, the vulture bobbing again. “He’s not here, is he?”

“Who?”

“That arse Gilderoy, of course, who else would I mean?”

“You know him?” Hortense giggled. It was most unbecoming on a woman at least as old as Grandmother was.

“I knew his father, and I know he’s a great windbag. Now would you please show me where that mole and wart book is? Or is it wart and mole?”

Hortense took Grandmother off in the right direction, and Neville slunk out. He knew Grandmother would suddenly remember several books she wanted to look at, although she’d only end up purchasing the wart one. He was free and clear for a good half hour, if he was lucky. He wanted to see if he could make it to Knockturn Alley. He’d heard about it, and he wondered if the rumours were true. Maybe there really was poisonous fungi growing on the stone walls and small creatures that reached up through the cobbles to grab your ankles and trip you so they could pick your pockets. Neville didn’t think he’d go in Knockturn Alley, just get a little peek at it from around the corner. He followed a zigzagging pattern, pretending to be interested in great big blue roses, and a milliner’s shop, and a handcart display of stunningly beautiful alchemical experiments. He didn’t want anyone thinking he was actually headed down there, just that he’d accidentally wandered into that area.

He was almost there, pausing briefly to admire some handmade amulets against werewolf bites, when he heard a stringent voice to his left.

“That’s him, isn’t it, Father? The Boy Who Lived?”

Neville knew he was being spoken about, and flushed painfully. He kept his head down, hoping they’d decide they were mistaken and move along without drawing the attention of the rest of the street. Most times, people didn’t really notice him, but if someone pointed him out, there was suddenly a press of people around him wanting to shake hands. Neville hated that.

He heard that voice, which sounded young, like him, discussing something in a more hushed tone with a deeper, baritone voice that was the child’s father. He decided to try to sidle closer to Knockturn Alley, maybe even peek in now. Hopefully that other boy would have forgotten about him.

As he took those last breathless steps and hoped Grandmother hadn’t missed him yet, another presence slipped up beside him.

“You’re Neville Longbottom, aren’t you?”

Neville let out a sharp yip of surprise and nearly jumped out of his skin. He did manage to knock over a rack with a display of earrings carved from obsidian collected after a dragon fire.

“Whoops!” he shouted. “Sorry, I’m sorry, I’m really sorry.” He tried to help the man clean it up, but he just stuck his hand into the sandwich the man had been eating.

“Get out of here, never mind!” the swarthy little man shouted in exasperation, and Neville scurried away miserably, his face burning with embarrassment. He stopped a great distance removed from the upset display to catch his breath, and the same presence glided up to him. Now he finally got a look. It was the boy who’d spoken a few moments ago, certainly. A boy with a very pale, pointy face and nearly white hair. Neville had the sinking feeling he knew who the boy was.

"I'm Draco Malfoy," the boy said, smiling to reveal even, white teeth—unfairly without childish gaps. Neville nearly shivered. "You are Longbottom, aren't you?"

"Shh," Neville said desperately, putting his finger to his lips and looking desperately around.

The other boy looked puzzled and even a little disdainful, but he did lower his voice. "I expected you to be a little more impressive, but I guess that's just looks. Anyway, how do you do?"

Neville stared at the boy's hand for a moment before tentatively taking it and shaking with him.

"Fine," he mumbled. "Thanks."

"You were going for a look in Knockturn, weren't you?" the Malfoy boy guessed, his tone sounding bored and bossy.

Neville looked around, saw no disapproving adults, and nodded.

The boy grinned again, showing his teeth again, which seemed to be slightly pointed, like his sharp chin. "Come on, then. I'll show you."

"You've seen it before?" Neville asked in amazement.

"Seen it? I've shopped there," he said lazily. "Father goes there sometimes, when the shops on Diagon don't have what he's looking for."

"Where is your father?" Neville asked, nervous.

"Oh, somewhere. Don't worry about him. Come on."

Neville reluctantly followed the blond boy back to the entrance to Diagon Alley, and carefully craned his neck to look. He was rather disappointed. No poisonous mushrooms. He didn't see anyone falling on their faces or screaming they'd been robbed. He pointed this out

to Draco, who laughed uproariously like it was the greatest joke ever told.

“The thieves on Knockturn are so good, you don’t know you’ve been robbed for a month,” he laughed. “Now, let’s go, I’ll show you some of the shops.”

“No,” Neville said nervously. “This is fine. I can see from here.”

“You’re not scared, are you? Honestly, no one would be stupid enough to pick my pockets, nor yours while you’re with me.”

“No,” Neville lied. He was mostly afraid of what would happen if he got caught, not what would happen inside the alley. “I just don’t want to. Dumbledore wouldn’t like it.”

Draco made a face. “That’s right, you’re very friendly with him, aren’t you?”

“What’s wrong with that?” Neville asked defensively.

The disgusted expression was abruptly wiped clean, and replaced with a smooth smile that was maybe a little bit sly. “Nothing, of course. You want to get an ice cream, then?”

“I—”

“Neville Longbottom, you get back here this minute or I’ll bare your arse in front of this whole street!” His grandmother’s bellowing voice echoed off the walls and was heard by most everyone who wasn’t deaf.

“Oops,” Neville squeaked, and raced away to join her. He looked back over his shoulder only once, and found that Draco Malfoy had already disappeared. When he caught up to Augusta, she took him by the ear and dragged him along.

“Don’t you ever leave my sight again without my permission, young man,” she scolded. “And don’t you go associating with that Malfoy boy, either.”

"Why not?" Neville said, thinking that getting an ice cream with another boy like a normal kid sounded very nice, really.

"Because I told you not to, and don't talk back to me, either!"

Neville followed her with a pang in a place he couldn't identify. It was too hard to be the Boy Who Lived. He wished that Harry Potter hadn't died. He wondered what that boy would have made of Dumbledore's lessons. What he would have made of Draco Malfoy, especially.

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"Do I really have to, Father?"

"Do you need me to answer that again?"

"No, sir," Draco muttered, looking down. He made a face. "But he's such a stupid lump, and afraid of his own shadow, and . . . and stupid!"

"Well, not everyone can be intelligent," his father said, his voice soft and slow. Calm was deadly where Lucius Malfoy was concerned, so that was no relief. "Sometimes the least intelligent people in the world can use a guiding hand, don't you think? An indispensable friend to help them think through what they cannot do on their own?"

Draco now caught the point of this unwanted friendship with Neville Longbottom. His father was devious, certainly, but why Lucius couldn't be the boy saviour's friend, Draco didn't know. Still, it was an impressive plan. Subtle and unassuming, just the way good plans should be. At least, that's what Father always said.

"Yes, sir," he answered, and tried not to sound like he was going into this kicking and screaming. He'd end up kicking and screaming without any metaphors involved if he didn't sound respectful enough for Father's liking.

Chapter Four

"Tell me the three F's of your technique," Two Rivers said patiently.

"Focus, Form, and Free!" the tiny class (consisting of just five boys) said with self-importance and some boredom at what they considered a ridiculous little memory key thought up by an old man who thought they were younger than they were.

"Flub, Fluke, and Failure," Harry muttered under his breath.

"Very well, you are all dismissed for today," the elderly man said, and four of the boys scrambled to their feet, noise immediately exploding from them in the way only preteenaged boys can achieve. Harry, however, got up slowly.

"Harry?" Two Rivers queried from his seat in the corner of the little room, which constantly smelled of woodsmoke and herbs.

"Here, Grandfather," Harry said softly.

"Come here."

Harry approached the old man steadily, and allowed the questing hand to come to rest on his shoulder. He gazed into Two Rivers' milky white-gray eyes without hesitation or intimidation. Two Rivers knew when a boy was avoiding him, and Harry wasn't trying to. At least, he didn't think he was. He had no secrets from Two Rivers, whom all the children in this small community referred to as Grandfather.

"Will you give me the longer version of your technique, Harry?"

"Yes, sir," he said tonelessly. "Focus on the being in the shadows of your mind, allow the creature to form and reveal its nature clearly, and free it to take control of your whole being."

"Good, Harry. Now, let me ask: can you see the creature clearly? Is it hard to focus for you?"

"No, sir. I know what it is."

"Then your trouble is freeing the creature, correct?"

"Yes, Grandfather," he mumbled. Like it wasn't obvious to everyone. He just couldn't do it. He didn't have the right magic in him.

"Do you respect it, Harry?"

"Sir?" the boy repeated in surprise.

"I don't know you very well yet, Harry. You've only been with us . . . what, three months?"

"I think so. I'm nine, now." Quite a bit younger than most of Two Rivers' students, but the Grandfather didn't take students unless he thought they were ready.

"Yes. Ordinarily, I'd know without asking, but you're a mysterious boy. You do not have to tell me what the creature is, if you do not wish to. But you must tell me if you have respect for the creature you see."

"I think so."

"Does the change that will come frighten you?"

"No, Grandfather," he said, suddenly passionate. "I want to do it, I want to know for myself what it's like. I think it will be amazing."

"It is," Two Rivers said, a smile pushing the many, many wrinkles in his face into bunches. Harry was becoming very fond of the old man, and the sight of those deep canyons made him feel affection and gratitude for the patience he'd shown. But the smile faded as he held his blind eyes on the young tousle-haired boy in front of him. "You do not believe in the creature, somehow. You wish for another."

"Maybe," Harry said, unable to speak above a whisper.

"Will you tell me why it troubles you?"

Harry broke his gaze, knowing that Two Rivers would know he had but unable to meet the steady blank eyes anymore. "Sirius will think it's stupid. My . . . my dad would have thought so, too."

"You know this for sure?"

"Noooo," Harry dragged the word out. "But they would. They were big, powerful things."

"And are you to be a mouse, Harry?"

"No."

"Do you want to tell me what you will be?"

"A bird," Harry said scornfully.

"What kind of bird, do you know?"

"An owl."

The blind eyes fell on him again with utter shock, and Two Rivers' hand, still on his shoulder, tightened into a death grip. "You are sure?"

"Yes, Grandfather."

Two Rivers slowly pulled him into an embrace, a rarity where he was concerned and something he'd never shared with Harry before now.

"You are more mysterious than I knew, young one," the old man murmured. "Perhaps I should tell you what the owl symbolizes." Then he pushed Harry back a little bit, shaking his head, but with his hands still holding the boy's shoulders. "No, not yet, I think. First you must speak to Sirius."

Two Rivers, the oldest, wisest, and most dominant member of White Valley, was the only one who knew Sirius wasn't his father. They all thought it was strange he called his father by name, but they weren't

big on asking questions, which was why they'd chosen to settle here for a while.

"Now, go, enjoy your afternoon," the old man said, patting him and pushing him out the door. Harry lingered for a moment, then gave the gnarled old hand a squeeze of gratitude before emerging from his little home into the sunlight.

It was Two Rivers who had granted them permission to stay, after sniffing out more of their secrets than they would have thought possible. And the very next day, Harry had been invited to join the other young boys in the Animagus transformation class. While it was a demanding subject in any land, here in the backwaters of Wyoming among a group of Native Americans, the transformation was almost a religion. Harry had learned to hold what Sirius could do with a deeper awe than he had before. Sirius, too, had learned it. He was always so self-deprecating, but the community had taught him some measure of respect, especially for the dog always resting in him. It was considered part of a man's soul, out here.

Harry walked comfortably down the dusty little street between the rows of shabby little houses and trailers with their scrubby little yards. Maybe he and Sirius didn't fully fit in here, being neither Native American nor particularly poor, but they were accepted well enough. He'd never be in any danger in this community. They looked out for each other here. He and Sirius both liked that. They liked that somebody might ask you what you were doing at the corner store so late at night yesterday. It was nice to feel so noticed. Maybe that, not Harry's lessons, nor Mona, was the real reason they had settled in here.

Jonny caught him up when he was getting close to Jonny and Mona's house, his expression curious. "What did you and the Grandfather talk about?"

"Nothing," Harry said, knowing he sounded sullen. He just didn't want anybody to know yet.

"You're having trouble manifesting your spirit guide, aren't you?" Jonny asked companionably, and began to chatter about all the boys

he new—adults now, some of them—who'd had trouble with the Animagus transformation. Harry knew Jonny made some of them up, and he really got irritated sometimes by the older boy's never-ending stream of words, but he always tried to get along with Jonny. Just for the sake of his godfather, who had become the center of Harry's world since taking him from England several months ago.

When they got to Jonny's house, they went in, and Harry banged the screen door loudly. Sirius and Mona had been extremely lucky Jonny had been with some of the other boys, not Harry, the time that Harry had caught them on the sofa in the living room. Jonny would have had it all over town by now. Even Harry, child that he was, knew that was liable to get them kicked out of this little community long before he'd successfully achieved his Animagus form. And while he knew it was inevitable at some point, he was eager to stay a little longer. Even if it meant putting up with Jonny's prattle.

"Mom, we're home!" Jonny shouted, which turned out to be unnecessary. Mona was right there in the kitchen, and it was a small house.

"I noticed," she said with a mocking wince. "Don't shout indoors," she added, giving him a little swat on the butt as he slipped past her to reach for the fruit basket on the counter.

"Hello, Ms. Mona," Harry said, giving her a smile.

"Afternoon, Harry. You want an apple?" she asked, snatching the basket from Jonny before he could take a second orange.

"No, thank you," Harry said politely. Sirius had promised to grill steaks tonight. He didn't want to spoil his appetite. Sirius made great steaks.

"Jonny, don't you see me making dinner?" Mona asked in exasperation as Jonny swiped another orange right in front of her. She fixed him with a look that made him drop it back into the basket.

"I'm going over to George's house!" Jonny shouted gaily as he ran off, unperturbed by his mother's light smack on the hand and waving the

permissible orange over his head. Harry's eyes trailed after him with an amused, almost confused, smile. He didn't follow him.

"Someone told him that if he eats more, it will feed his spirit guide and it will manifest sooner," Mona said, rolling her eyes.

Harry laughed at that, almost betting it was Sirius who told him. The look in Mona's eyes said she knew it, too, and he lost his laughter for a moment. It had never occurred to him before, since he'd never had anything of his own while living with his mother's family, but it was hard to share what was yours. Even if it was a person.

"Is Sirius here?" he asked.

She shook her head. "He was here fixing the screen earlier, but he went over to the Long's to see about their door."

Harry's smile came back, remembering the story that had gone quickly through the town, with knowing chuckles all around. Rob Long had finally freed his Animagus form at his fourteenth birthday party—a boar. He'd been so surprised by his transformation that he'd gone right through the door and it had taken half an hour to calm him down and bring him home. It was such a perfect picture of the way this community was. They had a strange magic here. Hardly a one of them could so much as heat a cup of water or light a candle, and you could forget stirring a potion, but Animagus forms were the norm rather than the exception, openly talked about even among the members of the community who had no magic. You didn't stay if you couldn't be trusted with that well-known secret.

"I'll head over to the Long's, then," he said. "Thanks, Ms. Mona."

Before he could react, she'd caught him up in a big hug. Startled, he froze in her embrace and wondered what had prompted it. She let go after only a moment, seeming to realize he didn't quite know how to react to her.

"You're a good boy, Harry," she said, her smile as warm as the rest of her. "You can come here anytime, no matter where Sirius is, you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, trying to grasp what she was saying, just barely getting it. She liked him. Just him. She didn't mind if he came around. Like she cared about him. Harry flashed a grateful smile at her, then hurried out. He heard her muttering behind him something that sounded suspiciously like, "won't hug his own kid, I'll have his head on a stake," as he closed the newly repaired screen door.

He started to go the Long's house, then stopped. Sirius and Mr. Long got along pretty good, and Harry didn't want to bother Sirius if he was developing a friendship with someone other than Mona. Sirius liked to joke and say they'd be long gone if it weren't for her (not where anyone else could hear him say it, of course), but Harry knew better. Sirius liked it here.

He decided to stop at Buster's house. He liked talking to Buster. He was the town's resident hippy. Harry had discovered through the joys of American television that every town was supposed to have one. Well, Buster was it for White Valley. And he did an excellent job of falling into the cliché. He grew his own weed in his trailer, and he was always talking about peace and love. He was nearly as wrinkled up as Two Rivers, and Harry had the feeling he'd already been grown when the free love movement became popular, but Buster had obviously embraced it fully. He was a lot of fun, sometimes.

Harry knocked, but wasn't sure Buster would care enough to come to the door to see who it was. He had the door open and the screen shut, and Harry fidgeted for a moment on the creaky little metal steps, noting that Buster was liable to tip over if he didn't fix the blocks on this side of the trailer. Maybe it would be a job for Sirius, who was pretty much the official handyman now. Finally, he pressed his face to the screen and found Buster, straining his peripheral vision. Buster was reading a book, which made Harry hopeful. He was usually writing a book when he was too stoned to make much sense. No doubt if he ever finished writing it, it would be wildly successful. Reading seemed harmless.

"Buster, it's Harry."

Buster looked up from the book and blinked at the shady interior of his home, seeming surprised that the sun was going down. He must be reading something good.

"Come on in, Little Man," he said, sounding genuinely pleased to see him.

Harry pulled open the door and came in, breathing the familiar odor of Buster's weed and body odor. He did bathe . . . sometimes. Harry suspected the smell actually came from his soup catcher of a beard, which probably had the accumulated leavings of every meal he'd eaten since he'd been old enough to grow it.

"What are you reading, Buster?"

"Mein Kampf." At Harry's blank look, he added, "you know, Hitler?" He shook his head, and grabbed a bag of weed off his end table. "You don't have to agree with a person to want to know how he thinks, why he does things," he said, shaking his head seriously as he rolled a joint. "It's deep shit, Little Man." He looked up briefly. "Want one?"

Harry snickered. "What, a shit?"

Buster gave him a playful smack on the back of the head. "A reefer, son."

Harry shook his head, pretend-glowering about the pretend-abuse. "Sirius would probably kill you if I ever took one," he said.

Buster shook his head. "Naw. Beat me up, maybe. But I think your father's more of a learn-as-you-go type of teacher. He ain't gonna give you a lot of rules, less you ask for them."

Harry shrugged, finding this likely true but unable to really get his mind around it. It would probably make more sense—and be more appreciated—when he was older.

"You been at one of those spirit guide classes?"

Harry nodded. "Just finished."

“You turn into an animal yet?”

“Not yet. I wish you could come, Buster. You’d like it.”

Buster chuckled, blowing smoke out around Harry. Harry settled back in the beanbag chair he’d claimed, ducking under the rising smoke. It wasn’t an unpleasant smell, just too thick to breathe. “Yeah, I’d get a kick out of it. Old Grandfather says I don’t have it in me, though.”

Harry had often wondered how such a completely unmagical person had ended up in a town like White Valley, but he didn’t ask. Buster was all right, anyway.

“You commune with the animal before you become it?” he asked, sounding interested.

Harry puzzled over that for a moment. “What’s commune?”

Buster took a deep drag. “You know, connect to it, share your minds and feelings. Not talking, just being.”

Harry frowned, tossing one of Buster’s carvings around in his hands. “I don’t think so. I don’t know what you mean.”

“People can do it, you know,” Buster said casually.

“Commune? Like, share minds?”

“Yeah.” Seeing Harry’s look of doubt, Buster smiled. “You got magic, Little Man. You don’t think you could? Try it.”

Harry just rolled the carving—a woman’s body, surprisingly tasteful rather than vulgar—around in his hands. Sirius had never mentioned whether or not this might be possible, for a wizard. Buster seemed certain it was so. Maybe Two Rivers had told him. But how could he do it with Buster, if Buster had no magic even to take an Animagus form?

Buster held out his joint, only half-smoke. “Here, it’s easier this way.”

Harry eyed the grizzled, salt-and-pepper haired man, and shook his head again. "I'll try it," he said. "How do I do it?"

"I dunno," Buster said calmly. "You just . . . float. Try to find me, with your mind. Don't think about it too much."

Harry locked eyes with Buster. Buster's eyes were a muddy brown colour, and full of lazy satisfaction with life. Harry knew eyeballs were just eyeballs, so the feelings expressed through them had to come from further back . . . behind the eyes . . . in his mind . . .

Harry almost didn't notice when his vision shifted from looking into Buster's eyes to seeing through them. But for a moment, he caught a glimpse of a woman. A woman with bleached-blond hair and a figure that had inspired the carving Harry held in his (forgotten) hands, rising above him, head tilted back, lips parted with a sharp pant—

Harry's hands trembled and he dropped the carving. The thunk of the wood on the hollow floor of the trailer jerked him back into his own mind. He stared at Buster with fear, thinking Buster would be angry. But Buster just smiled and took one long, last drag, blowing it out with a chuckling puff.

"Now you know Barbara," he said with no apparent concern. "Thought you could do it, Little Man. How's it feel?"

Harry shivered, and got up. "I have to go. It's dinnertime, Sirius will be looking for me."

"See you around, then."

"Yeah. Thanks, Buster."

Harry ran out the door, forgetting to be careful with the screen and letting it slam shut. It echoed down the quiet, dusty street, and there was a slight snapping noise when one of the hinges broke. He wasn't scared—yet. But he was startled. He hadn't known he could do that. He hadn't known anyone could do that.

He saw Sirius coming down the road from the Long's, hands tucked comfortably into the pockets of jeans with dirt on the knees and a plain cotton t-shirt shifting loosely with each stride. He was watching his feet in their biker boots scuffing the rocks on the side of the road, not Harry, and Harry slowed down. He watched his godfather for a moment. Sirius had filled out pretty well from the gaunt spectre he'd been in England, and he didn't look scary anymore. He'd lost two teeth in prison, but they were both off to one side and you couldn't see it unless he opened his mouth wide. He'd shaved off that scraggly beard and even though his hair was still long, it wasn't a tangled rat's nest anymore. It was tied back at the nape of his neck with a leather thong right now. He was whistling while he walked, a look of weary contentment on his face. He'd gotten the door fixed, then, and Mrs. Long had probably given him one of the renowned brownies she was always making.

Harry decided that Sirius didn't need to know about his somewhat invasive look into Buster's head right now. Sirius didn't need to worry about anything. He was still getting better from what had happened to him. Harry just wanted him to get all the way better, so he didn't stop what he was doing and stare off into space with a haunted look anymore. He did that all the time. Harry was afraid to ask him what he was thinking about. He wasn't sure Sirius would talk about it, anyway. They were still figuring out this whole child-guardian thing. They were just starting to be comfortable with each other.

Still, when Sirius looked up and saw him and smiled a greeting, Harry hurried to him and hugged him. They didn't hug much, but it was good to feel strong arms around him while he was in such a confused state. Sirius could take care of things. Harry had never doubted it.

Sirius' hug was hesitant and careful. Harry didn't know it, but Sirius had become so disused to physical affection that he couldn't remember how it was done. He was having to learn it all again, with a child he'd basically kidnapped just a few short months ago. It was no wonder he was cautious about it. He was cautious about everything. Mona, and the easygoing ways of White Valley, were finally starting to relax him, but it took time. He still dreamed he was back in Azkaban at least once a week, usually more often. It was hard to keep it from Harry, sharing a little trailer as they did, but he managed.

Harry was just a little boy, and he didn't need to be worrying about that.

"You must be starving," Sirius remarked. Harry had lunch at school, but lunchtime and dinnertime were awfully far apart for a young boy, if Sirius was remembering correctly.

Harry nodded eagerly. He'd been introduced to Sirius' steaks a few weeks after they'd come to America, at a cramped and ugly rent-by-the-week apartment complex—it felt like a palace after an Azkaban cell but needed a little cook-out to feel at all like a place to live for Harry. He wasn't a child to ask for much, but he'd probably eat Sirius' grilling every night if he could.

"Well, let's go home, then."

Harry burped, and giggled. Sirius fixed him with a Look.

"Excuse me," Harry said, still giggling.

Sirius smiled, then. He was determined that a boy raised by a single ex-con would still have manners, but he didn't want the kid having to be serious and polite all the time. Sirius had manners, too, once upon a time. He thought he'd lost them with his place on the family tree, but he'd sort of discovered them when he took Harry. He would do well by James and Lily's boy. He would. It was his only goal in life, besides eventually finding Peter and pulling his intestines out through his ears. Harry was just more important for now, just as he was sure the Potters would have wanted it. Revenge could wait for Harry to be raised.

Dinner eaten, they fixed a fire in the little fire pit Sirius had dug in the earth behind the trailer and lined with rocks. Sirius made them tea. They might be a couple of outlaw bachelors, but at least he could still make a proper cup of tea once in a while. Mona thought it was hilarious when he made tea for her. Harry took his with lots of milk and complete sobriety.

"Sirius?" Harry asked, fiddling with a twig in the fire while Sirius sat comfortably in a lawn chair and enjoyed his tea.

“Mmmm?”

“Do you care what form my Animagus takes?”

“Of course I care. I mean, it doesn’t matter what it is, but I want to hear about it. You’ve seen it, finally?”

Harry nodded, frowning as he poked about the fire. “I saw it weeks ago.”

Sirius bit back his question of why Harry had lied to him about it, then. Harry was obviously trying to tell him, and it wasn’t like he could blame him for not showing complete trust in a man he’d never heard of until recently.

“It’s an owl.”

“What kind of owl?” he asked, trying to sound nothing more than politely interested, but automatically making a mental note to ask Two Rivers what he thought about it.

“I’m not sure. Brown.”

Sirius smiled. That was about as specific as he ought to expect a nine-year-old to be. “Good for you, Harry.”

“Two Rivers said I’m mysterious.”

Sirius frowned at him. “Why did he say that?”

“When I told him I was going to be an owl, he said it.”

“Oh.” He changed his mental note about talking to the Grandfather to an urgent one. “Why do you think you’re seeing an owl?” he asked cautiously. He wanted to keep Harry talking, keep their line of communication open, but he wasn’t sure what Harry would talk about with him and what he wouldn’t.

Harry shrugged, then abruptly looked up into the sky. "Maybe because I like the nighttime."

"Do you?"

Harry nodded, looking shy all of a sudden. "I like the stars. And I like it when it's dark. It's easier to talk in the dark. And—" he ducked his head, the blush on his cheeks likely not just from the heat of the fire "—I like being mysterious," he muttered. "Like you."

Sirius stared at him for almost a full minute. Then, hesitantly, he said, "I didn't know you liked the stars so much."

Harry nodded, and returned his eyes to the sky. "They're . . ." He shrugged, gesturing grandly with his hands but having no words to express himself. "I like them."

"How would you feel about Astronomy lessons?"

"What's astrominny?"

"Ast-ron-o-my. Studying the stars. I'm not that great at it, but I could teach you a little, and I'm sure I could find a few books for you to read."

Harry wrinkled up his nose at the mention of books, then seemed to change his mind. "Okay."

Sirius was secretly elated at having found something he could share with Harry, an excuse for some actual bonding between them. His only outward sign of his happiness was a small smile and a hand reached to ruffle the boy's already unruly hair as he took his empty cup back inside.

Harry settled himself to the idea that learning what he wanted to know would require reading. Best learn to enjoy academic study. There were a lot of things he wanted to know.

Chapter Five

The black-haired boy sat entranced, his eyes closed. His glasses sat on the ground beside him, his hands rested lightly on the knees of his crossed legs, and he was breathing so slowly and shallowly that he hardly seemed to inhabit his own body. The middle-aged man who sat in front of him was watching with sharp eyes, a small smile quirking his lips. He had never seen such a dedicated student of this art at such a young age. He had a strong feeling that this boy was something special, especially after the conversation he'd had with the boy's father.

The boy's father looked nothing like him, apart from the same thick and unruly black hair. Even that was different, somehow. The man's was curly, the boy's, straight (well, mostly). He had the idea that they were not related, at least not in the way they claimed to be. But it was none of his business, really. The classically Western-world handsome features of the big man had been deadly serious when they talked. The pair would be in town for a while, apparently. He'd sought out a Buddhist priest who spoke enough English that he could make his needs known. And strange needs they were.

The boy must learn great control over his mind, the man had said. He had the potential to do dangerous things with it, if he wasn't careful. He'd already had an "incident" though what sort of incident he couldn't guess. No names were exchanged among them. None were necessary, the man had said. Only teach the boy control.

So here the ten-year-old child sat in meditation. Learning to seek peace within himself and seek the mysteries of the universe. He had lapped up the idea that everything was connected, that he was a part of each thing on this earth. The priest had begun to feel that the boy's past "incident" had been forging a connection with something by accident. The boy was eager to learn control, and eager to learn to connect himself with the world, both at once. Disciplined meditation was good. The priest had recommended the boy seek some training in a dojo, no matter the art he chose. Control over body could only improve control over mind. The boy had been perfectly eager for that, as well. Whether he was doing so or not was none of the priest's

concern, and he didn't ask. If they had no names, they had no lives outside the temple, either.

Who was he? the priest wondered as he watched the boy's soft breathing and intense inward focus. The boy was special. What might he become? It was anyone's guess, and the priest put it out of his mind quietly. Anyone's guess but his. He had many other concerns, and this boy was not his to worry over.

"Arigato," the boy said when it was over, bowing deeply, his face earnest. He spoke no Japanese, and knew not what to call the priest. Still, he tried his best to impart respect to his teacher and elder. Then he turned and ran to meet the man who waited for him outside, throwing his arms around his so-called father. It was this that made the priest keep his silence and even feel it was right for the two to be together. They loved one another. There was joy between them, whether the law said they belonged together or not. They had found one another out of all the people in the world to love, and it seemed unthinkable that they should be separated for any reason.

So the priest waved his hand in farewell, never knowing if the boy would arrive for another lesson once the last one had finished, and smiled a blessing on them both.

"I-n-c-o-n-s-p-i-c-u-o-u-s," Harry spelled out carefully, his gaze going distant as he thought about it.

"Perfect," Sirius said, ruffling his hair. They'd gotten more comfortable about touching each other as time passed. Affection felt more natural now; a hug was not something new and interesting anymore, but that was no bad thing. "And that's a word you ought to remember, my friend," he said ruefully.

"We are inconspicuous," Harry said without worry as he ducked under a large pane of window glass carried by two equally short men. Sirius sidestepped around it. Someone had blown up the front room of a potions shop in the market here, a couple of teenagers trying to play a prank while the proprietor's back was turned. It had the gaggle of Japanese wizards and witches in the market occupied today, and a couple of English tourists sparked no undue curiosity. Although Sirius

felt like a circus freak, with his height. He'd never considered himself particularly tall, and he'd actually felt on the short side when they'd been living in Wyoming, but he and Harry were, as they said, in a whole different world now.

Sirius missed Wyoming, but it couldn't be helped. With neither a home or a last name he could safely claim, he would never be able to marry Mona—nor would he want to. He'd almost thought it wasn't Mona herself, but simply the fact that she was female and accepting of his mysterious past, that had attracted him to her. Anyway, it was over. Jonny had started making a fuss about the whole thing, the town started whispering and turning Mona cold toward him, and then one night when he and Harry were sharing a fire out behind the trailer, Harry had melted down into an owl (and Sirius, who'd spoken to Two Rivers, had shivered and gone pale at the sight) and fluttered a few feet before crash-landing in the dirt and scrubby weeds. Sirius took that as the sign that they'd gotten everything out of White Valley they were going to get, and regretfully took his leave of the woman who'd slowly been healing what his godson couldn't.

Now here they were in Japan, the best place Sirius could think for Harry to grasp Occlumency and Legilimency without exposure to wizards who might know who he was. The two of them were coming to truly rely on each other. Like a real family, maybe.

"All right, spell . . . hm, spell Impedimentia."

Harry did.

"Poltergeist."

Easy.

"Pyramid."

"P-i-r-

"Wrong."

Harry frowned, then his face cleared. "P-y-r-a-m-i-d."

“Yes,” Sirius said, smiling. He didn’t know what the normal reading and vocabulary level was for ten-year-olds. He only knew that Harry had started out as a logical and analytical child, and the more books he read, the more intelligent he got. The more he read, the more he enjoyed reading and wanted to read. A mind like his could be truly frightening, given enough nourishment. And Sirius was determined to feed Harry’s brain as much as was in his power. For he had a deep and secret fear, no matter how far from home they ran. The fear that someday, Harry would need to call on every resource he had, because . . .

No, best not to think of that now. They were at a colourful and busy wizarding market in Kyoto, and they had been having a great time here. They’d come so Harry could discipline his mind, which was a serious project, but they had plenty of time for other pursuits. Harry wasn’t in school here, for obvious reasons, but Sirius had procured some basic lesson books in maths, grammar, and the like. He had been learning as much about Astronomy as Harry had, although he didn’t think it was possible to take as much joy in it as the boy did. Harry loved Astronomy.

“Um . . .” he said, casting about for a hard word to quiz Harry on. “Typhoon.”

Harry’s face was placid. “I don’t even know what that means.” It never seemed to bother him when he didn’t know something, as he readily admitted it, but Sirius knew that once he’d explained the word and spelled it for him, Harry would never forget it. So he did, and promised to spend a few dollars to buy a book about them from a bookstore near their home. Harry was trying to teach Sirius how to love books, and considered the bookstore his own personal library. Sirius didn’t have to read them to let Harry enjoy them, so long as he wasn’t looking up Dark spells or something. “How many of those . . . um, those things, are on display?” Sirius asked, waving his hand a box full of neat little rows of . . . something squiggly he did not care to contemplate too deeply upon the nature of. He suspected strongly that it was supposed to be food and just as strongly believed it would never be in his mouth.

“Eighty-four,” Harry said comfortably. He knew he wasn’t supposed to be counting them individually, but multiplying the number in each row by the number of rows.

“And if he was selling them five for a pound, how many people could buy?”

“Sixteen,” Harry said after a moment of looking distantly at nothing while he did the computation. “But he’s not, he’s selling one for about two pounds. I think they’re some kind of fish,” he added, squinting at the box. He shuddered with a young boy’s delighted disgust.

“Can I have one?”

Sirius gave him a look to indicate his impending insanity. “Maybe you ought to lay off the lessons at the temple for a while. I think you’ve strained your mind. And it’s may you have one.”

Harry just grinned. “They’re interesting, that’s all. I’ll just find a book about them or something. May I, Sirius?”

Oh, don’t turn him into a scholar, Padfoot . . .

“Two,” Sirius said the wrinkly man running the stall. “No, no, two of these.” Rolling his eyes, he held up his fingers. “Two. One, two.”

Harry chimed in with something in Japanese, and took the money from Sirius and counted it out for him, accepting two of the squiggly things.

Sirius stared at him. “You might be mysterious, as Two Rivers would say, but I know you don’t speak Japanese.”

Harry grinned at him, looking cheeky. “It’s not that hard to figure out how to count to ten, you know. I can do that in, like, five languages.”

Sirius frowned. Harry had gotten that little habit of speech from Jonny’s first girlfriend and he liked it not at all.

“Like five languages, or actually five languages?”

Harry rolled his eyes. "Okay, okay, I'm trying."

Sirius laughed and pulled him into his side, squeezing the boy tight and surprised by how big he'd gotten in the last year and a half. He'd looked so tiny and anaemic while living with his aunt and uncle, but while in Wyoming he'd baked brown and shot up in height. Now, with the aikido lessons (and Sirius had been very surprised that Harry had picked such a pacifistic martial art) he was getting pretty wiry, too. He'd probably start looking like a freak around here soon enough. Which was just as well, Sirius hadn't planned on staying long in Japan, anyway.

He wondered where to go next. Someplace no one knew them, someplace where he and Harry could just live as normally as possible. He wanted to let the poor boy relax once he'd gotten a grip on his brain, let him learn what he wanted to learn and ignore what he didn't. Be irresponsible once in a while. Have some fun in life. Because it was very likely that one day, maybe not too long from now, they would have to go back, Harry would have to . . .

No. Better not to think of that.

"You push harder," the girl said, trying to be polite without a good grasp of the language he spoke. "Massage head, please."

Harry deepened his strokes with the hairbrush the slightest bit, making the girl moan a little with pleasure. Harry was just as pleased, though the moan made him blush, as she'd meant it to do. Mia's hair was so soft and fine, and felt like silk under his fingers. He liked brushing her hair. Besides, he needed something to do while he waited for Sirius.

"You papa, he like anything special?" Mia (almost definitely not her real name) inquired politely. "We try ask him, but we no understand. He say ask you, you very smart, you maybe speak better."

Harry felt his face go still, and the hairbrush nearly fell from his stunned fingers. He backed up a step, his eyes wide, and ran into a cushion upholstered in a deep red that his face was nearly matching.

“He said ask me?” he stammered, feeling like he wanted to die. Oh, god, it was one thing to be here, but now they wanted to talk about it . . .

The girl’s peals of laughter were clear and bell-like, and just as cute and delicate as the rest of her. Harry was learning that there were many types of women in the world, and he wondered when he’d discover which type he liked the best. He thought he knew what Sirius liked, and he knew he ought not to be so prudish about it. These girls were, after all, prostitutes. It wasn’t like they would be embarrassed. Sirius obviously was not.

“He no like me,” the girl said, her narrow eyes crinkled with amusement. “Maybe you know why.”

Harry nodded. “He likes older than you,” he said.

The girl nodded back, seeming enthused about being able to talk shop. Even if he was ten years old. “He like woman his age, at least.”

“Or older,” Harry said. “And he doesn’t like cute girls, like you. He likes . . . strong women.” Harry tried to think it out. He wasn’t sure how to explain it. “Not with muscles,” he clarified, indicating his own small bicep to be sure she understood. He tapped the side of his head. “Strong in their mind.”

The girl nodded again, looking little less excited now. Her face had smoothed into something resembling . . . pity? “He like woman understand hard life,” she said slowly.

Harry nodded. “Yeah. And he likes women who don’t get attached.”

She frowned, not understanding.

He elaborated by dramatically clutching at her arm, and rolling his eyes, and saying, “don’t leeeaaave me!”

She laughed again with those sharp, clear tones, delighted by his performance. They were in a common area where a couple of girls were getting something to eat, and they laughed appreciatively, too.

Harry knew he ought to be uncomfortable sitting in the back room of a whorehouse with three beautiful creamy-skinned women, but they all treated him like their favourite nephew.

"You know, women who understand that he won't stay," he clarified. "Because he likes to move around a lot."

She nodded soberly. "You go soon, Harry?"

He shrugged. "Maybe."

"You mind?"

He shook his head, smiling a little. "No. I like to see new things. And I don't care where we go, because he's my dad and I want to stay with him. I want him to be happy."

She looked a little sad. "You papa, he a good man. But he no understand you a little boy, need a home." She touched his cheek.

Harry blinked rapidly, his face heating nearly as much as it had when they'd started talking. "I don't need to stay in one place, though. We just have to be together." Harry didn't understand it yet, too young still to express what was inside him. He couldn't tell her how desperately they wanted to cling together, the last remnants of an idyllic life destroyed by an evil man, and a source of identity for one another. He just said, "Sirius is my home now."

The girl nodded as though she understood this, well-versed in English or not. Harry looked around the bordello she inhabited, decorated in reds and blacks and full of just as much unpleasantness as temporary happiness, then reverted his eyes to the locket she wore around her neck, with a picture of her mother in it. Maybe she did understand, without the words being necessary.

"I miss you, Harry. You brush good," she said, ruffling his hair.

He scowled. Why did everybody do that? It was messy enough already. But he did pick up the hairbrush again and go back to Mia's hair. He was glad she was done for the night. She seemed exhausted,

and he thought she must have had a bad customer. He hated it when he saw the women come out of their rooms looking shaken or drained. Men shouldn't do that to women. They just shouldn't.

"Where you go now?"

Harry hummed a low noise, indicating he didn't know. He and Sirius hadn't talked about it. But he did think he wouldn't get much further with his sessions at the temple, and that it was nearly time to move on was as plain as the nose on his face . . . or the scar, in his case. Everybody asked about that, but Harry had been raised to think it was part of the nonexistent car accident his parents had not actually been in. He'd asked Sirius, but Sirius said he didn't know. It must have happened when he was already in jail. Although if it had happened at the Dursleys, why would they lie?

"I want to go to Brazil," he said, just thinking out loud. "I saw some pictures of Brazil on the computer, and it's so cool. I want to ask Sirius if we can go there."

"Brazil, huh?" Sirius said, coming up behind him and making Harry nearly jump out of his skin. "Really?"

Harry turned around, trying to catch his breath. Sirius had his shirt untucked, and he looked more relaxed and settled now. "Yeah. You want to see the pictures?"

Sirius shook his head, grinning. "I'll take your word for it. Brazil sounds nice. I'm sure you'll be speaking Portugese in no time."

"Portugese?"

"That's what they speak there. You haven't been minding your history lessons, have you? The Portugese discovered half the world."

"I did know that," Harry objected, scowling. "I just didn't know they discovered Brazil."

Sirius just laughed and drew him into his side for a hug. "You ready to go?"

Harry sighed, knowing it was two questions in one. "Sure."

Chapter Six

“Take that back!” she screeched, her voice so shrill and female that he nearly punched her, sister or not.

“I won’t!”

“Take it back!” she screamed even louder, and got a fistful of his hair in her hand, making his eyes tear up. He flung his arms out at her wildly, trying to get free of her without letting her rip out a chunk of his hair. She didn’t even flinch, accepting the hit he landed on her while attempting to gather even more hair in her grubby little hands.

“I don’t want to!” he shouted, his voice harsh with pain.

“I am not a dumb girl! I’m just as good as you are!”

“Fine!” he shouted at last, unable to take the tender flesh of his scalp being yanked on anymore. “Fine, just let go!”

“Say you take it back, Ron,” she said, sniffing and crying, her fingers still clutching.

“I do! I take it back!”

She finally, finally, let go, and he stumbled back, rubbing his head and glaring at her fiercely, his eyes still smarting with unshed tears. He wouldn’t cry. He was a boy, and he just wouldn’t cry. He almost punched her, but drew back when he saw his mother’s face poke out the back kitchen door, frowning.

“What is all that racket?” she bawled, looking put-upon. She was very good at looking put-upon.

“Nothing!” Ginny said huffily, wiping the tears from her cheeks quickly.

“Then stop screaming. I’m trying to write a letter to your brothers.”

Ron rolled his eyes at that. The twins weren't just Hogwarts students now, but Quidditch players, so Mum had completely forgotten all the letters the Headmaster had sent last year about Fred and George's pranks and detentions.

Oooo, he was so mad at the twins right now. Just because they'd made the Gryffindor team their second year, they'd turned into such prats. Not like they weren't always, but they were usually fun, anyway. Now they were acting all superior and saying he couldn't talk to them anymore, even during the summer. They said now that they were off to school, they didn't have time to play anymore. Play, for Merlin's sake (an oath Ron wouldn't say out loud unless he wanted a scolding from his mother), like he was still a little kid or something. He was ten, he didn't play anymore.

Ginny played, but she was just a dumb girl, just a kid. Not like Ron. Just because Fred and George were going to Hogwarts was no reason to start acting like Percy or something. After all, Bill and Charlie had gone to Hogwarts, and played Quidditch, and they were still cool.

He scowled at Ginny, who was, at present, basically his only source of companionship. She of the grubby hands and tangled hair that Mum had to brush for hours every night while Ginny hollered that she was ripping it all right out of her skull—just like she'd tried to do to him a minute ago. He wished Bill or Charlie still lived at home. But Bill was moving to Egypt, and Charlie had moved to Romania just last month. Mother said the house was too quiet. Dad said he could do with a little quiet. Ron just wished he could play with somebody besides Ginny. Except that he didn't play.

Ron started to go inside to see if there was anything to do in there (there wasn't) or see if there was a good program on the WWN (not likely) or anything to get away from Ginny (impossible). Instead, he and his sister ended up sitting side-by-side staring moodily out the window at the clear blue sky that looked so inviting and into which they could not climb unless it was summer and their older brothers had their brooms here. He pinched Ginny from time to time, but she didn't squeal for Mum, just kicked his shins. He knew he'd have a

mass of bruises on his legs if she kept kicking him like that, but at least her arms would be all bruised, too.

“What are you kids doing in here?” their Mum asked, coming in with a worried expression. When things got too quiet with these two . . .

“Nothing,” they both sighed at the same moment.

She looked at a loss for a moment, looking back and forth between them and pursing her lips in thought.

“Come on, then,” she said, her face softening with a smile that gave Ron hope. “You can help me make a cake.”

“A cake?” Ginny piped up in objection, although she was already getting up to follow their mother to the kitchen. “It’s not anybody’s birthday.”

“You don’t have to have cake just on a birthday, dummy,” Ron said.

“Ronald Weasley, don’t call her that!”

“Sorry,” he muttered, scowling in response to her stuck-out tongue.

It turned out that there was something decent on the WWN, if you ignored that it was for grownups, and that baking a cake with Mum was fun. She let them throw flour all over her, even though she screamed and said she’d hex them with pimples for a month, and she cleaned it up with just a few sharp sweeps of her wand when Dad walked in, home from work.

“Daddy!” Ginny exclaimed when she heard the sound of him Apparating in the yard. She dashed out the back door to greet him, forgetting to get the flour cleaned off her jumper first. He saw her coming, trailing white dust, and just laughed and caught her up in a big hug just at the spot in the yard where she’d tried to pull out Ron’s hair earlier.

Ginny was a really cute kid, Ron thought fondly, looking at how happy she and Dad were to see each other. He hoped nobody mistook his constant teasing and sulking for actual dislike or something. He loved Ginny, as one cannot love unless one has a baby sister to look out for.

But he really just wanted a friend.

“Your mother tells me you and your sister had an argument,” his father said when he came up to tell Ron to turn out his lights and go to sleep that night.

Ron shrugged. “I guess.”

“What was it about?” he asked, sounding conversational, but Ron knew better. He was supposed to report back to his wife. Ron thought about telling him, just for a moment. But . . .

“Well, I think Sirius Black just took him to Siberia to keep him prisoner!”

“Don’t be stupid! He’s sooooo dead!”

“Don’t say that, it’s horrible!”

“But it’s true! You think he’s prisoner in Siberia? That Longbottom kid is just as good as he is anyway, so who cares?”

“I do!”

“You’re just a dumb girl!”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Nothing, Dad. Just kid stuff.”

“All right,” Dad said placidly. “Goodnight, then.”

Dear Diary,

Today I read the most fascinating thing about—

“Hermione, dear?” her mother’s voice called, punctuated by a sharp knock on the door. “Dinner’s ready.”

Hermione grimaced at the mostly closed door (which was not allowed to be all the way closed, if for no other reason than so that the Grangers periodically wanted to make sure their quiet daughter was still alive) and sighed. She was trying to write all about the book she’d been reading today about seahorses and the way they had their young—she didn’t want to forget what she’d learned, so she had a reading diary, which was quite separate from her personal diary.

Still, dinner called, and it was nice to have time together as a family. Her parents were both dentists with a decent practice, and they kept busy. They tried to have dinner together at least weeknights. Her parents liked to go out on the weekend to see a play or have a nice dinner. Hermione’s babysitter during these outings probably had the most enviable job in the world. As soon as any new babysitter walked in, Hermione pointed out where the television remote was, where the refrigerator was, and retreated to her room for the rest of the evening. She was quite capable of putting on her pyjamas, brushing her teeth, and going to bed on her own, if her parents were out late.

They all chatted quietly about their day while they consumed chicken and asparagus. They told her about fitting some crowns and a particularly tricky root canal, respectively, and Hermione told them about seahorses.

“Going to be a marine biologist this week, are you, sweetheart?” her dad asked her cheerfully.

“Dear,” her mother said, shooting him a silencing look.

He just winked at Hermione. “With your brains, Hermione girl, you could be the most respected marine biologist in the world. If you want to. But it’s up to you what you want to be, of course.”

Looking mollified, her mother subsided. Hermione felt her cheeks heating up, even though she was pleased. If her dad thought she was smart enough for something like that . . . she must be smart, indeed. And she liked that.

As always, she managed to get herself ready for bed with no help while her parents had a glass of wine and talked to each other about grown-up things. She also managed to complete her diary entry. Sometimes she hated Friday nights, with no homework to do. At least she didn't have to go to school in the morning. School was so boring, the only good part was when she got to read ahead for new assignments. When she crawled beneath her blankets, she immediately slipped into the sleep of those for whom all troubles can wait for tomorrow.

The next day, she decided to go for a walk through her neighborhood. She'd finished the book she was reading, and her mother was forever saying fresh air would do her good. It was the perfect day for it, with just a few fluffy white clouds scuttling across a sunny blue sky.

Fresh air, maybe, Hermione conceded grudgingly as she traipsed along the sidewalk, holding her light jacket closed by putting her hands in the pockets rather than zipping it up. The bullies that lived on her street, however, were another story. There were three of them, the type of boys who always seem too large for the age they claim to be and somehow find each other in the teeming mass of humanity so they can gang up on everyone else. There was a girl, too, sometimes. The kind who is growing breasts too quickly and seeks solace for the confusion of her body by harming the bodies of others. All four of them lived right here on her street and desired nothing more, if past experience was any indication, than Hermione's utter ruin. She hoped she didn't run into them, as that would completely spoil the pleasant day.

For a while, all was well. Hermione let her mind wander to topics she normally didn't allow it to touch on, such as her own strange personality and how much she hated school. She didn't fit in there. She'd never fit in anywhere. And it worried her parents, she knew it did. She'd "accidentally" overheard some of their arguments in the past about how she read too much and didn't have enough friends,

and how she was too smart for her school but where else ought they to send her, and how they really hoped she'd outgrow her bushy hair and woodchuck teeth someday because her temper and incredibly reserved nature weren't going to net her any prizes.

"I'm ugly," she whispered to herself out loud, trying the word on, seeing how it fit. It fit, she thought with a sinking heart, all too easily. It slipped on like a suit tailored especially for her, and she blinked her eyes rapidly against threatening tears. Well, if she was ugly, then she'd just have to work harder to make up for it. Ugly people got famous all the time. You didn't see too many beautiful Nobel Prize winners.

"I'm smart," she said viciously. "Really, really smart. And I'll be a great scholar, everybody will think I'm so intelligent, and they'll like me for that."

She heard the laughter and shouting of the neighborhood bullies and faltered.

"Someday," she whispered. "Far away from here. They'll say, 'Hermione Granger is the best student I've ever seen, and she's on her way to being the best marine biologist in the world.'"

She walked past the yard the bullies were playing in, intent on walking past without so much as lifting her eyes from the sidewalk.

"Hey, Bookworm!" they shouted (and just splendid, it was all four of them today) and laughed. "Hey, Wormy Hermy, how're the books? They kiss back yet?"

She almost managed to ignore the whole thing with gritted teeth and downcast eyes, even the stupid nickname, no matter how much it made her blood boil. Then she heard a cat screech, and she froze. She looked up. She stared at the bullies. They had a cat. The four of them had caught somebody's poor kitty and were holding it up by the tail. Seeing that she was ignoring them, they went back to discussing what to do with their prize.

“Let’s just cut the tail off,” said one, and Hermione’s heart hammered.

“No, let’s light the tail on fire,” said the huge girl (Wormy Hermy had been her idea) and Hermione’s heart nearly stopped.

The one holding the cat up by the tail grasped its front paws together tightly to keep from being scratched anymore. He had gashes across both hands that made Hermione grimly satisfied. Served him right for being so cruel. She hoped those cuts got infected. He gave the cat a shake.

“Let’s cut off the paws and then light the tail on fire,” he said sullenly, wincing at the pain in his hands.

Hermione’s hands covered her mouth. “Oh, no,” she whispered, but she was forgotten and unimportant to them now.

“Naw,” said the last one, sounding bored, “I want to cut out the eyes.”

“What?” said the big girl, almost sounding shocked.

“I want to see it run into stuff,” he explained, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Hermione couldn’t breathe. No, they couldn’t, not the poor kitty . . .

“I just think it’d be funny,” he finished, shrugging, still sounding a little bored. Then he pulled a kitchen knife out of his pocket. “Nicked this last night,” he said casually. “I want to use it. Just hold the stupid thing still,” he addressed the boy who actually held the cat, who nodded with a look of awe.

The beautiful black cat, which had seemed to give up for a moment and rested silently in the boy’s grip, seemed to know what was coming. It flailed out, hissing and spitting and swiping with its claws at anything it could reach. They all shouted in consternation at the boy and told him to hold the thing still. The boy holding the knife waited

with narrowed eyes and a look on his face that could freeze even the mightiest heart—and little Hermione Granger was not mighty, so she was frozen solid.

But she was angry. Angry and scared and shocked. But mostly angry. How could they even think of doing something so despicable to that poor little cat? It was such a beautiful animal, and imagining it stumbling around with fat pink scars where its eyes should be made her nearly want to throw up and she knew she was crying. This was terrible. Someone had to do something, but who? All the grownups were inside watching the telly or out back mowing their lawn. There was just her. Just Hermione. And what could she do against the four of them, one of them armed?

“Stop it, stop it, stop it,” she whispered, nearly chanting, and her voice was rising higher and higher until it finally ended on a piercing shriek, “stop it, stop it, please just stop it!”

They all turned to look at her, startled.

“Forgot you were there, Bookworm,” said the one with the knife, conversational and easygoing. “You going to watch?”

He feinted with his knife toward the cat and she cried out, clasping her hands together.

“Don’t!” she said, knowing she was begging and unable to help herself. “Please don’t!”

“Why not? This your cat?”

“No, but it’s somebody’s cat! Don’t hurt it!”

The boy sneered. “I’ll do whatever I like, and no little girl like you is going to tell me I can’t. Unless you want some,” he added, his narrow eyes chilling her.

“No,” she whispered. She nearly broke and ran. But she didn’t. If this was going to happen, if she wasn’t going to do a thing to stop it,

then she had to stay and watch. She was a cowardly girl, and she deserved to see what happened because she wasn't brave enough to stand up to them.

The boy moved in with the knife, and Hermione nearly hyperventilated, already picturing blood squirting out and the cat's pitiful screams . . .

The knife's point was within an inch of the frightened, broken animal's eye . . .

No. I won't let them.

The thought came to her without a plan to back it up, and she thought fatalistically that she was about to die. How could she stand up to four big bullies like them? If only she could get the cat away, she felt sure she could outrun them.

The knifepoint touched the cat's eye and the cat yowled, and Hermione's heart broke. She stretched out her hands toward the creature, willing it into her arms, knowing she was crying out even while the black cat screeched, just thinking that the power of her wishing she had it could maybe be enough . . .

And then the damndest thing happened. That cat flew right out of the boy's grip and through the air and into her arms. Hermione had a moment of pure, unadulterated shock. Then she gripped the cat tightly and buried her face in the soft black fur and let out a sob.

"I got you," she whispered.

The cat hissed and clawed at her and she dropped it. It streaked away so quickly she barely had time to notice. She raised her eyes to the bullies, not knowing what had happened and not knowing what to say.

"What did you do?" the girl asked, her voice peculiarly high and quivering. "How did you do that?"

Hermione finally found her voice. "I won't tell you," she said, her voice dripping with disgust. "But just think what else I could do if you cross me."

Then Hermione turned and fled up the street nearly as fast as the creature she'd rescued. Wondering wildly all the way home what else she could do.

Chapter Seven

“Albus!”

He looked up from his desk and nearly ran for his life. Instead he said, “Ah, Minerva, there you are,” as though he’d been looking for her. He thought maybe a casual attitude on his part would defuse the situation. It didn’t work.

She approached him and laid her trembling hands on his desk so she could lean forward a bit and look him directly in the eyes. Even her tight black bun was quivering. She was in a fit of rage like nothing he’d ever seen before. Which meant that he’d been found out. He’d really been dreading this day.

“Don’t cater to me, Albus, I am in a foul mood,” she said in short, clipped syllables.

“So I see,” he murmured, leaning back in his chair to move away from the heat in her eyes. Sitting on his perch in the corner, Fawkes let out a worried trill, but Minerva didn’t even spare the bird a glance. “Might I ask what is the matter?”

“Does it do you some good to pretend you don’t know? It doesn’t help me!”

Now feeling real alarm that the woman might harm him before he had a chance to explain himself, he simply folded his hands into a steeple, resting his elbows on the desk.

“I assume this is about Neville, then?”

“When I first heard someone call him the Boy Who Lived, I thought they must have gotten confused, so I laughed and corrected them and sent them on their way. Now it turns out they must have thought I was a fool! Everyone says it, Albus, absolutely everyone. It was no mistake, they were just repeating common knowledge—common to everyone but me! Somebody took pity on me and explained the whole story: how Neville was just a baby but with parents like Frank

and Alice he might grow up to be dangerous to the Death Eaters, how he survived an attack from Voldemort just like Harry Potter did. They're all saying he's just as much right to be called that as the little Potter boy, who didn't live after all, did he?"

"It's really quite extraordinary, isn't it?" Albus murmured, looking at his interlaced fingers.

"Well, we all think you're extraordinary person, Albus."

"What has it to do with me?" he asked innocently.

"Don't play me for a fool, not anymore. You made that story up. You made sure everyone knew Neville, too, had survived an attack by Voldemort that never even happened!" She slammed her hands down on the desk on the last word. "Did you tell Fudge the story yourself? Is that where it started? I mean, really, Albus, how dare you do this? Don't you see how low you've stooped to do something like this?"

He remained placid on the outside, waiting for her to get to the pertinent part of her tirade. He could be patient while she lectured him.

It didn't take her long.

"Why?" she asked, her voice hoarse and tired. She sank down into a chair. "Why did you do it?"

Albus untangled his fingers and laid his hands palms down on the desk. "Because we lost Harry."

"We don't even know that for sure."

His brilliant blue eyes snapped with annoyance at such a trivial point. "If Black didn't kill him right away, he took him to wherever Voldemort's hiding and the boy died there! What do you think Black did, whisked the boy off to dine with the queen every Tuesday? No, Minerva, the Potter boy is gone, and Black thumbed his nose at us when he took him. But we still need a Boy Who Lived, don't you see that?"

“I can’t imagine what you mean.” Her lips were drawn tight, like she was attempting a bit of imagination and it hurt.

“He’s coming back, Minerva. Voldemort will come back. And our people will be devastated by it. They think he’s long gone, and when he returns, they’ll be completely unprepared. When they realize it’s happening again, they’ll be in despair. I have to have a Boy Who Lived to hold up before them, to rouse them to fight again.”

“And it’s got to be Neville,” Minerva murmured, her face going ashy as she suddenly realized what all his schemings meant. “Because of that prophecy . . .”

Albus sighed. “Yes, but pray don’t mention that to anyone just yet. I’d like to keep the truth of it from Voldemort as long as possible. There’s a fairly critical moment approaching in our future when that will become common knowledge, but it’s years off, still.”

“Of course, the big reveal. Which will be carried out by you, no doubt. Who does know of it?”

Albus gave her a bitter smile. “Half of them are sitting here. You. Me. Augusta Longbottom. And Severus, of course.”

Minerva’s lip curled in the slightest sneer, but Albus raised his hand to head her off. “Not a word. He is on our side now, and that will simply have to be enough.” He saw that his hands, quite of their own accord, were wringing together in his lap. “I’m afraid that Sirius Black might know of it,” he murmured. “I’m afraid James and Lily would have told him.”

Minerva’s still-ashen face turned a slight shade of green as she realized what he had realized long ago: if Black, determined enough to slip by them to kill his old friend’s child, could get past their defenses once, he could do it again. “No.”

It was on his lips to reply when there was a sharp knock on the door and the rather greasy head of young Severus Snape himself appeared. "You wanted to see me, Headmaster?"

"Come in, my boy," Albus said cheerfully. "I'm sorry, Minerva, but if you will excuse us . . ."

"Not at all," the woman said stiffly, standing and gathering her emerald-green robes about her as she prepared to descend the stairs. "Thank you for your time, sir."

"I am, as ever, a listening ear if you should need it," he said, still cheerful.

The door shut. Severus sat. Albus leaned his head in one hand and massaged his temples.

"Did you . . . want me to come back later, sir?"

Albus raised his head and gave Severus a short smile. "No, of course not." He was truly grateful Severus had interrupted Minerva, since he did not believe she would ever agree with him and the argument exhausted him. "Would you care for a lemon drop?"

"No, thank you," Severus said shortly, almost standing up again. He really did seem to find it impossible to believe common courtesy could be directed at him. "I assume that you wanted to see me regarding the detention I assigned to be carried out after the students return from their break . . ."

He stopped. Looked at Albus. Frowned.

"Are you in need of a remedy, sir? I know we don't keep the infirmary well-stocked during the winter holidays, but I could whip something up—"

"No, thank you, I'm fine, only tired. I appreciate it, though, Severus." He did try to be exceedingly kind to the boy, in hopes it would be reciprocated and that Severus would someday develop an actual

kindness in his own soul. He would stay on their side until the moment came when he could have his revenge for Lily's death, but then what? It was better, he thought, to try and create a bond between them, tenuous as such a thing might be. "I'm simply a bit weary. Juggling too many balls, you know."

"Is it the Longbottom boy?" Severus asked, sounding polite but with a slight sneer on his lips. He didn't find anything worthwhile in the Longbottom boy, himself, and he made no secret of it.

"When is it not?" Albus sighed. "I worry, Severus. I worry that I'm wrong about him, that Voldemort will never mark him, that this prophecy—"

Oh, drat. He really shouldn't mention that in front of Severus, he really shouldn't. The younger man's expression had gone very dark.

"He's alive, isn't he?" Severus spat. "Who else could that prophecy be about, at this point, whether he honestly survived an attack or not? Or are you waiting for the Dark Lord to really mark him?" he sneered, rolling up his sleeve just the slightest bit to reveal Voldemort's faded claim on him. He whirled around, his robes swirling about his legs. "Prophecy isn't set in stone, old man," he cast over his shoulder as he left.

Albus was more troubled by that than by anything else that had been said this day. If prophecy didn't have to come true, then what was the point of any of it? Not only that, but without Harry Potter to give him a cause, how long could he really expect to keep the brilliant, tormented soul of Severus Snape on a leash?

Sirius and Harry slipped away from the group of tourists with their busy chatter as they set up their camping gear. It was about a week-long trip to hike in, stay overnight, and hike back out, but they were in no particular hurry to get to Brazil and didn't mind the time it took. Harry had been so fascinated by what he'd read about the ruins at Machu Picchu that Sirius thought he'd enjoy a little detour on their way to their new home. They were both in good shape, even if Harry's legs weren't quite as long as his, so they came up the Inca

Trail with all their worldly possessions on their backs. Unfortunately, they'd run into a problem.

"You really saw a ghost, Harry?" Sirius asked softly when they were far enough away.

Harry nodded, face gone pale and tense with worry. "It was . . . scary, Sirius. He didn't talk, he just stared at me."

"Where?"

Harry pointed up the trail, darkening with twilight now, where they'd just come down from seeing the Sun Temple. "On the path."

"Why do you think he was staring at you?"

"I don't know," Harry said in a small voice. "He had a lot of blood on him."

Sirius shivered, thinking of the Bloody Baron he remembered from Hogwarts. Sounded similar, and he didn't blame Harry for being frightened.

"I don't want to sleep here," he continued in a determined voice. "I just . . . don't. Can we go?"

Sirius opened his mouth to argue that they hadn't even had a chance to see everything yet, and he certainly didn't have the energy to hike half the night and set up camp in the dark. Then, looking into Harry's trusting, pleading green eyes, he shut his mouth again.

"Sirius . . . there might be more."

Now Sirius stifled a shiver and cast a furtive look around him, even though they were a ways removed from the crumbling structures. Harry might be right. He swallowed down the bitter pill of frustration at a kid's nighttime fears, reminding himself that plenty of things did go bump in the night. Especially when they might be surrounded by the

ghosts of Incan men slaughtered by Spanish soldiers or wasted by Spanish disease.

“Sure, kid,” he said, pulling Harry to his side and giving him a rough hug. Merlin, how he was growing to love this boy. They’d been together near two years now, in Wyoming and Japan, and now here, and he caught himself at times thinking of Harry as his. He had to remind himself that Harry would always be James and Lily’s first, even if they were gone now. After hearing the little Sirius had brought himself to explain of his parents, Harry had almost hero-worship of them. He had a feeling that if he tried to insinuate himself as Harry’s father, they’d run into trouble, and he liked things the way they were.

They retrieved their gear and started away as quietly as they could. Sirius hoped no one would ask why they were leaving, as he didn’t want to have to explain. But he and Harry tended to keep to themselves, even though they’d run into a lot of other hikers and tourists along the way, and people generally didn’t question those who held themselves back from the group.

As they headed back the way they’d come, Sirius had to admit it wasn’t such a bad thing to be leaving so soon. They’d spent the whole day awestruck, crawling over the ruins and discovering interesting things, and now they had the trail pretty much to themselves. He wasn’t thrilled about having to hike while already tired, but the night was just a little cool, the stars would be out soon, and he was with the boy he loved like a son. They marched for a good hour in companionable silence, Sirius waiting for Harry to ask questions about ghosts and Harry seeming content just to be away from them.

It was on the tip of his tongue to suggest they stop for the night, when Harry grabbed his arm and tipped his head back toward the sky.

“Look at the moon,” he said softly, the surface of his glasses shining with the orb’s reflected light.

Sirius obediently tilted his head and looked. It was nearly full and shining clearly, and Harry was obviously enraptured. It had been a very good idea to get Harry out of the crowded city for a while, he

thought. Japan had been fun, and also hard work on Harry's part with the meditation-cum-Occlumency lessons. It had also been noisy and packed with people, and Harry had seemed to visibly relax when they got here and saw the wide open spaces. He thought Harry had missed Wyoming and the friends they'd made in White Valley, but also the quiet pace of life they'd had there. Sirius knew they would end up in the big city again here, but he hoped to carve out a little space that would be just their own. Maybe even get Harry into school of some kind, as the kid was going to become distinctly eccentric if he spent all his time around Sirius alone.

Sirius turned to Harry to say that the moon was very beautiful, indeed—but suddenly Harry wasn't there anymore. He seemed to melt away and disappear and Sirius nearly shouted in surprise as a great owl rose up from beside him, flapping huge brown wings and curling its talons to avoid ripping his arm open as it beat its way up into the air. Sirius was shocked. Harry had only managed the transformation once so far, and now he'd done it without a word of warning. For Merlin's sake, the kid was ten years old, this shouldn't even be possible!

Harry flew in circles around his head, then suddenly swooped down and used his claws to pluck at Sirius' shirt. Wonderingly, he realized that the solemn child was playing with him, enjoying the strange feeling of being an animal. So Sirius bent to get Harry's abandoned spectacles, dragged Harry's pack off and wedged both their packs in a pile of stones to hide them. Then he was the one melting down and disappearing. He stood up on four legs and shook himself as if he were wet, shaking off the humanity and adjusting his mind to take in the riot of scents and sounds around him. He could hear Harry's wings beating above him, swooping down low, and he took a running leap into the air, snapping at the bird above him. Harry sharply corrected and rose up again, and Sirius laughed in a great bellowing series of barks. Then he started to run.

He ran, the wind streaming through his thick black coat, and Harry beat the air above him, coming down and circling around his head sometimes to tease him and see him jump up and try to snatch him out of the air again. He felt alive, and free, and alert, and powerful. He just felt good.

They ran around that way for an hour before returning to retrieve their packs. The owl sat for nearly a full minute before Harry was able to master himself and return to his human body. It was fun to watch. First there was a big brown owl huddled on a rock, then a boy shot up out of it, appearing with his legs drawn up under him. Harry nearly fell off the rock, but Sirius caught him and put him to rights, then handed him his backpack. They were thoroughly tired now, but Harry seemed to be in excellent spirits. They quickly found a place to lay out their sleeping bags and rest.

Harry started to talk while they were arranging their little camp for the night. His mood was turning serious again, and Sirius mentally tried to adjust from the lighthearted freedom of half an hour ago.

“Did you run with my dad like that?”

He smiled a little, remembering. “Yeah. James could outrun me, he figured that out pretty quickly, but I had enough teeth to remind him not to get too full of himself.”

“You had other friends, though, didn’t you? Were they Animagi, like you?”

Sirius’ smile slipped a little. “Yes. Well, Remus wasn’t.” He paused, thinking for a long moment. Harry’s curious, bright eyes stared up at him. He toyed with the idea of telling him all that long story. He was so tired.

“I don’t mind that it’s just us,” Harry said softly, “but I thought you probably missed your friends.”

It was just them, it had been since Sirius had taken Harry away. It was only natural for Harry to be wondering just where in hell his guardian and protector had come from.

So Sirius admonished him to lay down, and settled in to tell the story. The whole long, fascinating, bloody painful story. How he and James had been friends from the beginning, how they’d quickly made friends

with a boy named Remus Lupin and how they'd picked Peter Pettigrew up like a stray you felt sorry for and had to feed. All the good times they'd had. The pranks, the sneaking out, cheering James on at Quidditch games, then trying to hold Remus together and keep him from killing anybody once a month. Later, pulling some epic stunts to get Lily Evans to notice James, usually by humiliating her childhood friend Severus Snape. Then how things had turned so serious, how without anyone being able to pinpoint the moment, they were at war with a man calling himself Lord Voldemort. They'd fought, gone up against some really nasty characters. They were so young when they were first blooded in battle, so achingly young. Then James and Lily got married, and had Harry. Harry somehow became a symbol for everyone in their little group, a little bit of hope in a world gone mad and frightening. Sirius had been so proud of James for making a family and a home in the midst of it all, the only one of them who had.

And there he stopped. He couldn't tell Harry the rest of it.

"Then Peter betrayed all of us, and you know what happened there, with me landed in prison and him running around somewhere scot-free."

It had been the right decision to leave his revenge in England and take Harry away. He believed that.

"What about your friend Remus?" Harry asked sleepily.

"What about him?"

"Isn't he still in England somewhere? I bet he doesn't even know you're innocent."

"Oh, well," Sirius said carefully. "He probably doesn't know, at that."

Harry had taken off his glasses, but his bright eyes were still fixed on Sirius. "He was your friend for a long time, though. Don't you miss him?"

Sirius couldn't speak just then. He wanted to answer, but the small ache in his chest exploded outward at Harry's words, and suddenly he missed his old friend so badly he could hardly breathe.

Harry left his sleeping bag and came to Sirius. Sirius was surprised by it, to say the least, but he allowed Harry to climb into the bag with him and bury his face in Sirius' chest. He really was a good boy, Sirius thought, putting his arms around him. He didn't have any words to comfort his godfather, but he was doing his best to fill up that loneliness.

"Why did we leave?"

"What?"

"You could have convinced him that you weren't the traitor. I'm sure you could have. And if that Dumbledore guy that was your leader was any good, he'd believe you, too. We could have stayed there and worked it out. Then you'd be with your friends."

Sirius blew out a deep breath. He hadn't heard the prophecy word for word, but he'd been told enough. Enough to know that he didn't want Harry to know. Because he'd had some time to think about it. Maybe he never would have reached this conclusion, if they'd stayed in England, but out here, so far from it all, it was possible to feel as though they were outside of the influence of prophecy. And so Sirius had thought hard about that prophecy and the way things had happened, and determined that if Voldemort hadn't heard of it, James and Lily would be alive even now. He would never have had a reason to attack a baby boy, and they would have never died to save him. Prophecy had no meaning apart from what those who heard it gave it.

But Harry was intelligent and calculating, and he'd found the one discrepancy in what Sirius had done. And Sirius had to answer him. It never occurred to him to lie to Harry, the boy was too smart and their relationship too trusting for that.

"There's a prophecy, you see. About you. Supposedly you and Voldemort have a connection to each other. But listen to me, and

listen well. We're out here camping near the ruins of Machu Picchu, and Voldemort, if he's alive, isn't anywhere near here. I don't want to tell you what I know of that prophecy, because I don't want you to think you have to follow it. If you're not in England, nobody can force you to do anything you don't want to do. When you're older, I might tell you more, and you can decide then what you think about prophecy. But for now, you're just a boy, and you don't need to have that kind of burden. Do you understand?"

"Not really," Harry admitted, still laying in his arms and now sounding very sleepy. "Maybe a little. But that's okay. I trust you."

Harry's eyes were closed, and so Sirius thought it was safe to let himself cry.

Chapter Eight

Sirius sipped his drink, feeling a pleasant ache in every muscle of his arms and chest. It wasn't the painful ache of the first few weeks of backbreaking labour he'd encountered and fought through, just the rewarding exhaustion of a day hard at work. He'd picked up a job almost as soon as he and Harry had gotten to Rio de Janeiro. Easy on the mind and hard on the body, loading and unloading at a warehouse. Like he'd done in Wyoming, he'd gotten work to avoid draining the old family money he'd relied on when they'd been in Japan. The nice thing about manual labour is that nobody asked too many questions. You did your work, they handed you some cash, and you went home. It wasn't enough money to completely support the two of them, since Sirius had picked a neighborhood where they didn't have to worry about getting murdered too often, but they were getting by well enough to suit him.

There were a lot of other guys who did similar work, and this was one of the bars they liked to hang out in. Sirius had come in with two other guys from the warehouse. He wanted to fit in well enough to avoid looking like a suspicious outsider. He didn't know how far across the magical world news of him and Harry would have spread, and maybe it was ridiculous to think one of the guys lifting crates in a warehouse was a wizard who'd care about that . . . but he was here working the warehouse, wasn't he?

One of the guys he'd come in with was a man who'd just started working with them earlier in the week, a dull, plodding sort of fellow who was putting away drinks like he was racing the end of the night, and Sirius didn't think that guy would give a Knut to know Sirius was an escaped convict with a kidnapped child. The other guy . . . well, he and Miguel were getting to be friends, almost. And Miguel wasn't like most of the guys he worked with. He was sharp and decently educated, and he might actually do something with that kind of information. Sirius didn't suspect him of being a wizard, but he doubted Miguel would bat an eye at finding out they existed. Not for the first time, he wondered what a guy like him was doing in a life like this.

One of the other workers came stumbling over to where they sat, clapped a hand on Miguel's shoulder, and said something too slurred for Sirius to make out. He wasn't that great with understanding the language, anyway. Miguel grabbed the man's wrist, and in a fluid motion, turned around and spun the drunk around. He proceeded to shove the guy's face into a wall, making Sirius stand up and take a fighting stance on instinct. But the man crumpled bonelessly to the floor, and nobody rushed in to defend him. Miguel picked up his drink and drained it, threw a bill on the counter, and sauntered out.

"Hey!" Sirius said, abandoning his drink and following Miguel. "Hey, what just happened?"

Miguel turned around and smiled crookedly. "I love my sister, but I think I'll kill her," he said, waiting for Sirius to catch up.

His sister, whom Sirius had never met, apparently was a hooker or something. Miguel had never fully explained it, but it was hard to misinterpret the look a couple of guys got when they were talking about Miguel's twin. She was probably gorgeous, Sirius thought a bit wistfully, looking at Miguel's fine facial structure and clear skin.

"What did that guy say?"

"Nothing," Miguel waved him off.

Sirius scowled at him, realizing there was more to this than just a slight on his sister's rapidly disappearing honour. "What did he say?"

Miguel scowled back and gestured grandly. "He asked if we pretty boys have tried with each other what he did with my sister last week."

Sirius took a moment to piece that together, realized he'd just been called a fairy by a drunken lout, and nearly ran back to be sure the idiot never got up off the floor. Then he decided that Miguel, as a native, was perfectly entitled to ram a guy's face into the wall, whereas he, an outsider, was not. He had done so with an amazing amount of power and grace, and Sirius wondered if Miguel was a student of the martial arts like his godson was.

“So what you’re saying is I probably shouldn’t have followed you out,” he chuckled.

This helped Miguel to find the humour in it, and they both laughed for a moment. Then Sirius went one way, his coworker went the other, and he ceased to be a single guy having a drink after work and took up the role of child’s guardian. Harry was usually done with his studies by the time Sirius came home, and they’d have an hour or two to be a family before bed.

He came in to find Harry watching t.v. while he stirred a pot of noodles on the stove. The kid, at least, was learning to speak Brazilian Portuguese, the way he learned just about everything else—quickly. He was actually laughing at whatever was happening on the sitcom. He had a pan of tomato sauce on the other stove burner, and he was alternating between the noodles and sauce with his wooden spoon. He looked up when Sirius came in and greeted him cheerfully.

“Welcome home.”

Sirius ruffled his hair, and got out a loaf of bread, buttering slices while he asked Harry about his day. Harry chattered contentedly about his martial arts lessons, which he’d been happy to continue here, and complained just as cheerfully about his math lessons. Part of the reason they weren’t totally getting by on the money Sirius was making was due to his having enrolled Harry at a private school where they taught in English. Harry might be picking up the language quickly, but not that quickly.

They settled down at the very tiny table stuck in a corner of the very tiny kitchen, leaving the t.v. on. Sirius wondered if Harry had remembered that tomorrow was a momentous day, then realized Harry wouldn’t think it was quite as momentous as he did. Harry was looking at him quizzically, obviously waiting for him to stop daydreaming so they could enjoy their meal.

Sirius shoved a forkful of pasta into his mouth, made sounds of delight, and gave every sign that he was consuming the most

delicious meal he'd ever tasted. Harry rolled his eyes at the playacting and dug into his own (admittedly bland) food. He was a boy wizard, not a cook. His good nature was one of the things Sirius had managed to infuse in him, he thought proudly. Harry had been such a sober child; he'd had to learn a sense of humour.

His chewing slowed as he watched his young charge eat enthusiastically, replenishing his body's supply after a day of activity. Sirius had expended even more energy during his work, but he abruptly dropped his fork onto his plate. Who was he kidding? He wasn't remotely hungry, not now.

"What?" Harry asked, his voice muffled around a mouthful of half-chewed food.

Sirius took a moment to glare at him, and Harry gulped it down and apologized for talking with his mouth full.

"It's your birthday tomorrow," Sirius said quietly.

"Yeah, I know. I saw the cake mix in the cupboard and everything. So?"

"I'm going to take you shopping for your eleventh birthday."

"Shopping?" Harry asked suspiciously. "For what?"

Sirius gave him a sour smile. "A wand, actually. It's time for you to have your own wand."

Harry nearly choked on another bite and gave Sirius a wide-eyed look. "Really?"

"Yes."

Harry nearly jumped out of his chair with excitement, but he paused at his guardian's quiet and serious demeanor. "What is it?"

Thoughts of Hogwarts and friendships and prophecies and deadly enemies all flashed through his mind.

“I’m just not quite ready for you to grow up yet,” he said with a little smile. “I kinda want you to keep being a snarky little kid for a while.”

Harry gave him a pitying look. “You don’t want me to get old enough to deal with that prophecy, you mean. Sirius, I can have a wand without needing to run back to England all of a sudden.”

Sirius didn’t answer.

“Well, unless the prophecy says you can’t eat, you should,” Harry said briskly, and shoveled the last of his pasta into his mouth. He stood up and took his plate to the sink. “Gotta do homework,” he mumbled, still chewing. This time there was no reprimand or apology. Sirius attempted to follow Harry’s example, then took his plate to the sink and sank down in front of the t.v. This little bit of technology was not something he was used to, but he’d gotten attached to the box. But he didn’t relax. Harry had, true to his word, trusted Sirius and not asked once about what they’d talked about that night outside the ruins of Machu Picchu. Yet it had been there. For months, he’d been able to look at Harry and know when Harry was thinking about it. And he was afraid of what the rest of the night and their day tomorrow would bring.

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It turned out that he was right to be worried. After about an hour, Harry came back out of the closet they called a room and sat down on the shabby sofa next to him. There was no small talk, no preamble, nothing but the bald facts. Just the way Harry was, and Sirius had learned not to expect differently.

“I want to know the rest,” he said plainly.

“The rest of what?” Sirius asked, turning off the t.v. Even when they were speaking English, he wasn’t paying much attention, anyway.

“The rest of the story. That stupid prophecy that's got you so worried. Why my parents had to hide. That betrayal. I want to know.”

“Does it have to be tonight?”

“Yes, I think so,” he answered, as though it were a real question and not a rhetorical one. He'd obviously been thinking hard. Not like he didn't always think about everything hard, of course.

“All right,” Sirius sighed, getting up and heading for the kitchen. “But I'm not doing this sober.” He grabbed a bottle of firewhiskey, one of three that had followed them from England. This was the last one, and he looked at it with sorrow. Nobody made firewhiskey like Rochester's, and you couldn't get it anywhere but home. It was still half-full, but he had the sneaking suspicion that most of that would be gone by morning. After that, he'd just have to make do.

“Fine,” Harry said, standing at his elbow, startling him into almost dropping the bottle. “Then I'm not, either.”

Stunned, Sirius just stared at him. Harry looked back up with a firm jaw and eyes shining with determination. This was one of those moments parents dreaded, Sirius realized. This was what James had been talking about when he said that Harry was cute now, but he was afraid of what Harry would be like when he got older. And now James had gone and left him to deal with those problems . . .

“All right,” Sirius said, his voice sounding lazy yet feeling anything but. “But I doubt you'll like it.”

They both settled down on the sofa with a shot, cut with the smallest bit of water, and Sirius waited for Harry to take his first sip of the smoking drink. Harry grimaced, gasped, and nearly choked, then schooled his features and raised the glass almost to his lips again. “Well?”

Sirius actually chuckled, despite how much he didn't want to have the conversation that followed. He took a sip and sighed as the burning liquid went down.

“Dumbledore was the one who heard the prophecy,” he began. “I don’t know exactly what the prophecy said, but I heard enough. The gist of it is, you and Voldemort are destined to be mortal enemies. You were born at the end of the seventh month to parents who’d defied Voldemort three times, and it said he would mark you somehow.”

Harry’s hand went instinctively to his forehead, and Sirius reached out to rest a gentle hand in his hair.

“Yes, I think so,” he confirmed. “Anyway, that was what made James and Lily decide they needed to go into hiding. They’d already fought Voldemort, and they weren’t so terrified of him as some were, but they were afraid for you. Dumbledore told them how.” Sirius explained the Fidelius charm, and how a Secret Keeper worked, as well as his reasons for not becoming that important wizard in the charm. Peter had seemed like such a great choice, especially with Sirius and Remus suspecting each other of being the spy. James had thought that Sirius suggesting another had been proof enough that it wasn’t him. “But I was a little bit more afraid of Voldemort than James was,” Sirius said with a dry, humourless laugh. “I didn’t want to be tortured for information, not if I had it. I could withstand anything if I didn’t know where James was, and I was sure they’d come after me. I thought it was funny that they would torture me for nothing, while the one person they’d never think was that important was who had the information.” He shook his head, and went on, hardly noticing when Harry expertly poured out the next drink.

He continued with the tale of how one little boy had destroyed the most powerful wizard of the age, and how he’d known immediately that Voldemort wasn’t dead when he arrived at the ruined house in Godric’s Hollow. If he was dead, there’d be a body. The clever wizard had dragged himself out of there. When he came to the part where he confronted Peter in the street and the cowardly little man committed that despicable act, he faltered at last. He was on his third glass already, and Harry on his second. He was sure Harry’s stomach was in agony, and his head was definitely fuzzy, but that wasn’t the reason for his hesitation. He simply didn’t know how to explain it. How

he'd lost his mind completely. That whole first year was a blur to him, beginning with that moment.

"It's funny," he said slowly, his tongue a little thick. "I can remember that one moment so clearly. Peter screaming at me, playing his little game in front of everyone. I remember how my hair was making my neck itch, and how the sun was shining off the oil on Peter's nose. Then the street exploded, and I couldn't see, and I don't remember much of anything for . . . a long time. I'm not sure how long. I know I was shipped off to Azkaban pretty quickly, and I can't describe that place to you. Turning into a dog was the only way I survived without going completely mad and dying, like all the others. I could make the guards ignore me that way, for a while."

He knew he was rambling, talking about dementors, and what they did to people. How he'd escaped for brief times, trying to keep reminding himself of his innocence, of the knowledge that Remus and Harry were out there and needed to know the truth someday. He tried to pick up the thread again, to explain what it was that Harry really wanted to know.

"The prophecy," he remembered. "It says . . ." His hand wavered, but he reached out and pulled Harry closer, wanting to protect him, wanting fiercely for him to stay this small and safe and far away from all of that. "I remember when James told me. It says, 'neither can live while the other survives.'"

Harry was squinting at him almost painfully. Sirius wanted to tell him he'd be able to see better if he pushed up his glasses, which had slid so far down his nose they'd almost fallen completely off, but he wasn't sure he could manage to do that and still remember to continue the conversation. Harry had at some point poured him another shot of whiskey, he didn't remember when.

"So I guess it means that you or Voldemort—"

"It means I'll have to kill him," Harry said, his voice hoarse from the burn of the whiskey, and sleepy-sounding. "But I don't. Have to. He's

not even here. We can just stay here, like you said. You said I don't have to do anything I don't want to while we're here."

"That's right," Sirius smiled, feeling inordinately proud of Harry. "Now we've got to sleep, both of us. We're taking the day off to find the best wand maker in the city. You deserve the best, you know."

Harry stood up and lifted Sirius' legs onto the ratty sofa, then dropped them and ran for the bathroom. He careened off the doorframe, but still made it to the toilet before he started throwing up.

"Told you you wouldn't like it," Sirius muttered, and his eyes dropped closed.

-O-O-O-

His breath puffed in and out in controlled gasps. His arms were starting to shake, and his head was pounding with pain, and there was a light sheen of sweat over his whole body. But he was barely concentrating on the pushups he was doing. His mind was completely occupied with the dreams of Azkaban prison. Visions of the dementors filled his mind, and the sense of despair and loneliness was so absolute he could taste it, along with the sour awfulness of the alcohol that had been absorbed into the lining of his mouth last night. No connection. Nothing good. No light. Just nothingness.

Now he knew why Sirius took the closeness of a woman when he could find it, wherever he could find it. It was one of the few ways he could push aside this loneliness that crept back up on him when he dreamed. Harry was gratified to realize that he himself helped Sirius forget that time, too.

Sirius' mind seized, seeming to realize the intrusion, and the dreams ceased abruptly. Harry was forced out and Sirius came awake with a snort, sitting up and flailing his arms out against the threat. He immediately groaned and lay down again, throwing an arm over his eyes. Then he peeked out to see Harry slowly pushing his torso up and sitting back on his butt on the floor. Harry put on his glasses and met Sirius' eyes calmly.

“Were you just doing pushups?” Sirius whispered in a scratchy voice.

Harry nodded.

“And Legilmency on me?”

“Yeah.”

He seemed to notice Harry’s drawn, sweaty face suddenly.

“Boy, you have a hangover. Congratulations.”

Harry grunted.

Sirius sat up again and stared at him, wincing but not giving in to his body’s protests. “Why were you doing that, much less while hungover?”

“I need the practice,” Harry answered. He wasn’t sure Sirius would understand this, but he’d been thinking about it since the light streaming in from the bathroom window hit his eyelids and he’d found himself asleep on the bathroom floor. “I need to be the best.”

“Why?”

“Because Voldemort believes that prophecy. And you don’t think he’s dead. So he’s out there, and he’s going to come after me again someday. I don’t think we can hide forever. So I have to be able to beat him.”

“Why don’t you let somebody else do the fighting, Harry?” Sirius asked him. He’d been expecting the question. “This is why I didn’t want to tell you, I didn’t want you to feel obligated to fight—”

“I’m not obligated. I want to.”

Harry felt his face turning red as Sirius continued to stare at him like he'd never seen him before. It was true that they didn't have a lot of conversations this important, and maybe he was a little young to be making decisions like this, but it seemed so clear to him right now.

"I keep thinking about Buster in White Valley. And my priest in Kyoto, and my instructor at the dojo. You told me what Voldemort does to Muggles. You told me what he's like. He would hurt people like them, just for being Muggles. Them especially, because they know me. That's not right, Sirius. They can't fight him, he's too powerful for them. So I have to do it. I want to keep them safe. There's so many people that he could hurt, but if I train hard in everything, I could beat him. I could keep him from hurting people. He could hurt you, Sirius, and he could kill your friend Remus. But I'm going to be a strong wizard, you always say so. I could beat him."

He could see Sirius' face changing, going from a sort of despair to surprise, to a sort of acceptance. But when Sirius beckoned him forward and Harry stepped into his embrace, he heard Sirius whisper,

"I was afraid of this."

Harry felt bad, knowing Sirius wanted to keep him away from this life, but it was his decision to make.

"I'd better ask Miguel where he trained," Sirius muttered.

Harry leaned back to look at him. "Huh? Who's that?"

Book One: Becoming

Arc Two

Without You

the world looks different tonight

smaller

or larger

or only more frightening

the night holds all my secrets

innocent

or deadly

truth found in darkness

my hands hold the future

invincible

or brittle

weighted with choices

i am here without you tonight

alone

or uncertain

hiding and desperately becoming

“The lesson in breathing

Is never using control”

~Falling Up, “Hotel Aquarium”

“And I believe in you

Although you never asked me to”

~Josh Groban, “You’re Still You”

Chapter Nine

“Another year,” George sighed.

“A thousand more illicit activities to carry out,” Fred added agreeably.

They had hurried through the barrier at King’s Cross Station intent on escaping the spectacle of their mother saying goodbye to her youngest son. She was really revolting when it came to Ron, sometimes.

Fred nudged George in the ribs, got an elbow back in response, and rolled his eyes. “Look there, you great prat,” he said, nodding.

There was Hogwarts’ huge gamekeeper, Hagrid, trying to look inconspicuous and failing miserably. He was thumping along with one hand tucked deep into the pocket of his fat coat, wearing an expression of veiled excitement and anxiety.

“That’s a bit unusual,” George observed.

“What do you reckon?”

“Follow him?”

“Exactly what I was thinking, brother dearest.”

That they did, and viewed a deliciously odd and intriguing sight. Hagrid took something very small out of his pocket and handed it to

none other than their school's headmaster, who was trying just as hard and failing just as badly to look like he fit in. Old Dumbledore immediately took the . . . whatever it was, and tucked it out of sight under his robe. He turned around and vanished on the spot.

The twins looked at each other.

"A mystery."

"Thrilling indeed."

"We ought to solve it."

"If we have time."

"Right you are, George. That job on the prefect's bathroom is going to take months of preparation, and certainly holds top priority."

Conversation ceased as they came back to the crowd of students preparing to board the train. They saw Ron getting on, and saw Lee Jordan surrounded by a group of boys with gleaming excitement in their eyes, several of whom were grabbing girls by the shoulders and attempting to push them closer while the girls squealed in protest. The twins immediately shouldered their way through to Lee's side to see what was going on, and were duly impressed by the large creature boxed up in his grasp. Then it was time to board the train and get on their way to school. It left no time for further discussion of the strange activity they'd witnessed at the platform, but with their eyes they promised to speak on it later.

The trip was uneventful, and over before they realized it. The twins exited the train, spilling out in a press of people. Lee Jordan somehow managed not to get crushed by the mob, which probably had something to do with the box he was carrying (which they had spent half the train ride admiring and making plans for). They were happy to be back at Hogwarts and ready for another season of Quidditch. They were less happy to have spent the half of their train ride not devoted to Lee's pet spider fending off their younger brother. He could be at Hogwarts, fine, that was to be expected—but hanging

out with them? Please. Anything but that. Detention with Filch, by Merlin, but not an hour with ickle Ronniekins. That spoiled little parasite could find his own friends.

They got into a carriage with none other than Oliver Wood and spent a cheerful few minutes assuring him that they were indeed going to be Beaters this year and Gryffindor was certain to win this year, and et cetera. Wood was utterly predictable, but amusingly so (at least by Fred's standards, and George was willing to agree). Lee was nearly as anxious for the coming season, as McGonagall had promised him he could commentate the matches this year. It ought to be a highly entertaining season, if nothing else, though their estimations of entertainment included Lee letting his new pet loose in the stands before each match.

Ron's hands nervously twitched at his (hand-me-down) robes while they waited. Were they straight? They were. He raised one hand to scrub at the side of his nose, where a girl had informed him he'd had a spot of dirt. The girl, bushy-haired, buck-toothed, and looking if possible more nervous than Ron, was standing right next to him. She gave him a small smile and said,

"Don't worry, you've got it."

He dropped his hand to his side and pretended not to be paying attention to her at all. Normally, he'd be glad of a friend. But he'd overheard her saying on the train that she was Muggleborn, and there was Draco Malfoy staring right at them. He didn't want the sneering little blond boy so much as looking in his direction, after all the things he'd heard from his father about Malfoy's father. He was likely to be a huge pureblood maniac, for one thing. But . . . his robes were brand-new, and he looked so polished. Why couldn't his father make money like the Malfoys?

Ah, no, it was too late to avoid that pale cold eye. Malfoy was heading over.

"Oh, look, another Weasley," he drawled.

Ron tried to stand up straighter. "What makes you think you know who I am?"

"Let's see . . . red hair that hasn't seen a comb in months, robes that went out of fashion ten years ago . . . not too hard, is it? Which one are you, anyway?"

"My name is Ron. You're Malfoy."

"I know I am," he said, raising his eyebrows, his face a picture of amusement. He finally deigned to take notice of the glare of dislike the bushy-haired girl was giving him. "So you're the one whose parents are both Muggles?" he asked, with obvious distaste.

"Yes," she said boldly, tossing back her wild hair. "I'm Hermione Granger."

"She your girlfriend, Weasley? I hear your family has no standards at all."

Ron scooted away from her quickly. "No," he said loudly. "I don't even know her."

The girl, who had apparently thought that telling him his nose was dirty constituted friendship, seemed to wilt a bit. Ron just avoided looking at her, so he wouldn't have to feel guilty about abandoning her to the mean-spirited observations of the blond boy.

"I can't believe you were even allowed in," Malfoy drawled, looking at the girl. "You know what I think? I think you'll drop out in a month and go back to your little Mud—"

"Don't say that word," another voice rang out from the back of their group, sounding commanding.

They all turned to look, and were surprised. Neville Longbottom (sometimes called, in tones of maliciousness, the other Boy Who Lived) had been moving in a little island of isolation, not speaking or being spoken to. For what was there really to say to a boy like him?

His appearance, plump and mild, was a severe disappointment to everyone who'd been expecting someone with a little more presence. But when he interrupted Malfoy, he seemed to get bigger. His solemn face took on a determined set, and he stared down Malfoy like he wasn't afraid of him at all.

"Oh, come on, Neville," Malfoy drawled, sounding bored. "You know it isn't—"

"I know I don't like that word," the boy maintained, his focus not wavering, although his cheeks were turning red. "So just . . . don't."

Malfoy just narrowed his eyes, like he was weighing his options, and Ron wondered, a little intrigued by the scene, whether or not Malfoy and Longbottom already knew each other from somewhere. He'd called him Neville.

"Fine," Malfoy said with a shrug, and the mood of tension abruptly broke. "Enjoy your stay at Hogwarts," he said to the Granger girl, just to be clever.

The other boy just gave Malfoy a sober look and said, "Thanks, Draco," and retreated back into his bubble of isolation. Ron wondered how the boy managed to be so very apart when he was standing right there with the rest of them. Then, suddenly, a woman with a severe face and festive green robes appeared and began telling them what they were about to do. Ron had been worried about this. Fred and George had said there was a test they had to pass to get into their new houses. What if . . . what if he ended up in Hufflepuff? What if he didn't even pass? Would they send him home?

He wasn't the only worried, he thought, as they were shepherded into the Great Hall. Despite the distraction of the beautiful starlit sky overhead, they were all shifting glances everywhere and muttering nervously. The Granger girl informed them all that the sky was only a trick, as she had read in some book. Well, really, did she honestly think anyone of them believed the Great Hall was simply open at the top? Of course it was magic!

When the Sorting Hat introduced itself, Ron felt his worry fade away. He should have known Fred and George were just fooling him. It was just an old hat you had to put on. The hat would know what he wanted, he was sure, and that would be all right.

Granger proved herself to be insane by talking to herself all the way up to the hat, but she went into Gryffindor with no problems. Malfoy, no surprise, ended up in Slytherin almost before the hat touched his head. Nobody should have been all that surprised that Neville Longbottom ended up in Gryffindor, either. Finally, Ron's turn came around, and he started to think, as he slowly walked forward. Where did he want to be? He'd always thought he knew, but when the moment had come, outside the doors, it had been Neville who stood up for Granger, not him. Did he have any courage at all? He just wanted to have some real friends that he could share this school with. But friends . . . if he wanted them, he knew where to find them. Even the Granger girl probably wasn't so bad.

So the hat called out, "Gryffindor!" and he hurried to the table to be greeted by everyone. The Granger girl didn't look too pleased, but she was probably upset about how he'd moved away from her when Malfoy started picking on her. He'd make it up to her later, maybe. But his older brothers were happy enough to see him, if entirely unsurprised. He was starving, and eager for the feast to start, but they had to wait for crazy old Dumbledore to have his fun first. Honestly, with as much time as Longbottom spent with him, he was likely to be crazy, too. Then, finally, food. They tucked in with pleasure, then Ron figured it was time to introduce himself to his new housemates.

"Ron Weasley," he said to a thin black boy on his left.

"Dean. Thomas," the boy replied, pausing in his rapid consumption of the meal to shake his hand.

"Glad I didn't end up in Hufflepuff, aren't you?" he asked another boy, whom he seemed to remember being called Seamus. The boy opened his mouth to reply, but it was Longbottom who spoke up.

“There isn’t anything wrong with Hufflepuff, you know. All the houses are important and add something to the school.”

“I wouldn’t say that about Slytherin too quickly,” Ron replied, feeling annoyed by Longbottom’s old-man formality and his interruption when Ron was trying to make friends. “Right?” he addressed Seamus.

“Uh, yeah,” the other boy said, looking at both Ron and Longbottom uncomfortably. He and Dean Thomas turned to face each other and struck up a very private, very rapid conversation.

The Granger girl was nearly forgotten.

Albus dabbed at his eyes with the handkerchief he kept in his robes, trying to simply look as though he’d turned to converse with someone, not get himself under control. He reined in his emotions and carried on, then felt free to enjoy the excellent feast. The house-elves on the staff seemed to outdo themselves every year, and he wondered how long they could continue outperforming their previous year’s feast. And yet, none of this fooled Minerva. When she joined him at the table, she immediately asked about his momentary display.

“Whatever is wrong, Albus? Surely you were expecting Neville to be in Gryffindor.”

“Yes, of course I was,” he said. “Forgive me, I was simply joyful to have my expectations met.”

How did she always seem to know when he was lying? Her sharp gaze didn’t leave his face, and he felt a spark of irritation. Honestly, when people decided not to tell the entire truth, why did others always insist on getting it out of them, rather than assuming they had their reasons for the misrepresentation and leaving them be?

“I was thinking about the Potter boy,” he said slowly. “About how he surely would have been in Gryffindor, too, like his father was. His father was such a clever, brave lad, wasn’t he?” Who lost his life, so very young, because he listened to me. “I feel sure Harry would have been like him.”

He had harboured hope, however small, that the Potter boy was still alive, after these three years of absence. But the spell they used to track down all magical children in Britain of the age for Hogwarts had not found the boy. He was not here. He did not seem to be anywhere. And Albus had finally given up that ghost of hope. So the brief loss of control over his tears wasn't so surprising, was it? He was grieving for what they'd lost for the first time since the boy had disappeared. And the heavy weight of that damnable prophecy seemed to be settling on everyone fully only just now.

The years ahead of them were looking long and arduous. But Albus was losing the hope that years were what they had. It wasn't for no reason at all that he'd asked Nicholas to allow him to bring the Philosopher's Stone to Hogwarts. There were rumours. Mere whispers, yet, but they were there. Things were happening, people were behaving strangely, and Albus had made it a point to have friends who would see and report such things. If it were to happen, he wanted to know. And now he was beginning to see the signs. If he were to know where the Philosopher's Stone was, he'd take it. And use it. And that would be dire, indeed. But how long could he prolong the inevitable, he wondered? How long could he hold back the threat, to allow Neville to grow up? There was only one guaranteed way of doing so, and that would be to know that Neville's enemy was dead.

Tom Riddle, the Dark Lord Voldemort, was most certainly not dead.

Chapter Ten

“What’s wrong?” the bigger man taunted him, his arm across his throat. “You can’t break this hold? After everything you’ve learned?”

The sight of the even white teeth grinning at him mockingly made rage burst in him, but the man was expecting him to get angry and lash out. Instead, he lay still for a moment, letting him hold him onto the ground, nearly choking him. Then, when the man’s grin widened into the more natural sign of victory, losing its mockery, he swung his legs up as high as he could and hooked his feet onto the man’s body. He got hold of him around the waist and kicked out again, hard.

The man was jerked back just enough for the boy to slither out of the grip on his neck and land a hard jab into his chest, knocking him completely back. The boy kept his knees bent so that the man wouldn’t land on his straight legs and break them, catching the weight of mans’ body with his legs and using them to push him even farther. He sat up at the same time, following the man’s trajectory exactly, until he was pushing the bigger man down and pinning him to the ground. He perched on the balls of his feet with his legs splayed to either side, making sure he couldn’t easily be pushed off.

With one arm thrown across the man’s chest, he drew back his other arm and struck out with his fist in a tight, controlled punch that stopped the merest inch from the straight, perfect nose of the man beneath him. Their eyes met, and the man let out a deep breath and grinned again.

“Good,” he said.

Harry let Miguel up, bouncing from his crouch up onto his feet in an instant.

“Aw, come on, you know that was amazing,” he replied with a grin of his own. “Especially since I had my head locked between your legs a minute ago.”

Miguel just laughed and ruffled his hair. “Yes. Now, let’s practice with . . . what do you call them?”

“Staves,” Harry said, his eyes lighting up. “Like in Robin Hood.”

“Yes,” Miguel said, sounding puzzled. “Rob the hood.”

Harry just laughed and eagerly retrieved the wooden staffs leaning against the wall in the garage. They didn’t use the garage to park cars, none of them had a vehicle. The floor of it was covered in mats so they could train in here. Harry would have considered now a good time to slip on a pair of padded gloves, but Miguel didn’t believe in protective equipment. He assumed that if you got hit, you deserved it, and therefore deserved the pain involved. Fighting with these weapons didn’t really incorporate the joint locks and grappling techniques so important to the Brazilian jiu-jitsu style, but Miguel tended to stress diversity and well-rounded training. He’d trained as far as he could in the art without taking on his own students, then had started training in capoeira. He’d given up on that oddly graceful and richly historical art for a while in favour of training the students who’d presented themselves to him.

Harry and Miguel fought with the big sticks for a several minutes, mostly silent, sometimes grunting or yelping in pain as the wood smacked over knuckles, shoulder blades, shin bones. Mostly it was just the steady crack, crack, crack, of their blocking maneuvers. Then it was the creak of the door opening and Catalina telling them to get their asses into the shower or they wouldn’t be sitting at her table for dinner. That had them both scrambling to put away their minimal equipment as quickly as possible. Nobody missed Catalina’s cooking if they could help it, and she didn’t get a chance to do it often.

There was two bathrooms in the house, but you could only run one shower at a time, so Harry let Miguel go first while he completed a quick homework assignment for his music class. They were learning how to read sheet music, which was fine. It was only when you put a musical instrument in front of Harry that they ran into a problem. He really, really, really sucked at music. He could read notes, no problem, but he had very little natural talent with any instrument. Not only that,

but he was completely tone-deaf. He threw off the other students when they tried singing, and couldn't keep the piano keys straight to save his life. Despite his teacher insisting that it could be trained into him and he just needed to apply himself better, he'd rather apply himself to Miguel's lessons. The teacher insisted to Sirius that he had an attitude problem, and Sirius had reprimanded him quite sternly for slacking off—while they were at the school. When they got home, he'd admitted it was a relief to find something Harry wasn't good at, and they'd left it at that. He had to do his homework, but if he didn't want to get better at music, he didn't have to.

Catalina didn't get Harry's recalcitrance at all. She loved music of all kinds and sometimes went with a couple of her friends to play out on the street to entertain tourists and earn a little cash. She did some percussion, but they really raked in the reais when she picked up a pandeiro or something and danced. Miguel's grace in the martial arts had translated in his twin sister to grace on the dance floor. She could learn just about any dance style she set herself to, and she'd admitted to being trained in traditional ballroom as well as the much more "energetic" dancing involved in a little samba. Sirius got very grumpy when Catalina went out to dance with her friends. He didn't go, being not exactly talented in that area. Sirius wasn't the ghostly-pale and skinny man he'd been a few years ago, but a suntan and muscular shoulders didn't give him any rhythm, either.

Finally, showered, his wet hair still clinging to the back of his neck, Harry and the three adults sat down to eat in the kitchen.

"You need a haircut," Catalina said, fingering the wet fringe laying on the back of the boy's neck.

Harry just glanced pointedly at Sirius' ponytail and raised an eyebrow. Catalina laughed, which was gorgeous. Everything about her was, but she was particularly animated and beautiful when she laughed. The sound of her laughter had driven men to do very foolish things. Then she uncovered the food so they could eat. Harry was a growing boy, and Miguel and Sirius were both hard-working men. The pile of pork chops and dishes of beans and rice disappeared so rapidly anyone watching would have sworn they'd inhaled it. Harry, his food mostly consumed and his stomach feeling less like it was about to

touch his backbone, looked around the table at his leisure. And smiled.

Miguel was still steadily shoving down black beans while reaching back onto the counter for the pão de queijo Catalina had cooked earlier in the afternoon. There had been a time Harry would have just called it cheese bread, but he'd learned a lot in the fairly short amount of time they'd lived in Rio de Janeiro. Sirius was still eating, as well, but he was also running his bare foot over Catalina's calf muscles to see how long she could hold back from giggling. He nabbed two of the cheese rolls from Miguel and tossed one to Catalina, who nibbled at it delicately and watched her men enjoy her cooking. Harry would be happy to grab some of the bread himself, but he'd gotten home from school in time to see Catalina hiding the cuzcuz branco she'd been making. Catalina's days off work usually involved excellent meals, as well as a nice, clean house. The boys did try to pick up after themselves, but they were baffled about things like remember to dust and sweeping crumbs off the floor rather than into a corner. They also professed not to know how she did it, waitressing all day long and then coming home to take care of them, but they were all perfectly well aware. She worked hard, harder than any of them did. But she did it out of love rather than duty, so that was all right.

It was strange to think of all they'd found, just because Sirius had noticed how masterfully Miguel had handled a drunk in a bar. A casual query had proved Miguel to be a serious student of the martial arts, and a slightly less casual query had led to Harry becoming Miguel's first student. He was actually a difficult student, having learned many instincts from aikido that he had to un-learn to become good at the down-and-dirty grappling techniques Miguel was teaching him. His second student, with no previous habits to struggle through, was much easier to teach—although Sirius was also older and less agile than his young charge. He was bigger than his teacher, but the whole point of Brazilian jiu-jitsu was that a small man could defeat a larger one, especially one so inexperienced. Harry could still pin Sirius sometimes, though less frequently than when they'd started several months ago.

“I’m going to do the dishes,” Catalina said, getting up abruptly. “Quickly,” she stressed, giving Sirius a promising look that Miguel completely ignored as though it hadn’t even happened.

“I’ll do them,” Harry said, rising from his chair and beginning to help her gather the dishes from the table. He’d rather do the dishes than watch Sirius and Catalina try to wash them while smouldering at each other. Catalina tried to protest, but Harry told her off for spending all day working when it was her day off—in Portuguese. He’d been picking up plenty of that just from listening to the twins’ bickering, although he was getting lessons at school as well.

While he rinsed the dishes, he thought mournfully of the cuzcuz branco, the coconut tapioca dish Catalina had been making. Well, maybe they’d have it tomorrow. Miguel helped Harry finish up the dishes, then he went to watch t.v. for a while, and Harry went to his room to study a little more. It was quiet enough in the house. He and Miguel had the bedrooms on this side of the house, Sirius and Catalina shared the room on the other side and tried to be tactful about the other occupants.

Harry remembered exactly when they’d met Miguel’s sister Catalina. It had been after his third lesson with Miguel, before Sirius had agreed to start them. Catalina had come by to ask Miguel if he’d beaten up one of her clients, Sirius had stared at her until Harry thought his guardian’s eyes would fall out of his head, and that was that. A few surreptitious visits to Catalina in her capacity as a prostitute, and suddenly they were madly in love and Catalina was giving up her wealth of clients in favour of Sirius Black. She had quickly found herself a rather more respectable means of support. Maybe a month after that first meeting, and Miguel and Sirius were letting go of their shabby little places so the four of them could move in together in a tidy three-bedroom house in a middle-class neighborhood that none could afford apart but could all together.

It seemed strange to Harry that his own interest in Brazilian jiu-jitsu had led to this, but here they all were. There was no mistaking it. They were a family, now. They’d all been in desperate need of one, and they’d found each other. Miguel and Catalina might have been

getting by since their upper-middle class parents had died when they were fifteen, but there'd been nothing left after dealing with their father's debts and escaping the guardianship of a dreadful (now deceased) aunt. The rigours of life had made the time pass by so quickly they'd hardly noticed they were both twenty-five, broke, and lacking the higher education they'd planned on—until Harry and Sirius came along and they saw the commitment to making Harry excel. Now none of them were alone, anymore. Harry had somehow found himself the child of three people rather than one. Sirius wasn't the only one asking him if his homework was done and admonishing him not to talk with his mouth full.

There was only problem in this cozy little world. Miguel and Catalina didn't know them. Not really. The twins had no idea of just what Sirius and Harry were, and while Sirius planned to keep it that way forever, Harry wasn't so content with keeping his magic hidden like this. They still had private lessons, the two of them, so Harry could practice spells, and his homework still included magical history textbooks, but it was like that part of them was fading away.

It might be time to remind Sirius that his adopted son wasn't trying so hard simply to please him.

Sirius hit his hand on the floor frantically, slapping against the mats, and Miguel unlocked his arms from the hold he'd had on Sirius' neck. They were friends, but Miguel didn't go easy on him in practice.

"You did well today," Miguel told him with an easy smile. "You're getting better."

And well Sirius knew it. Any extra flesh that had been accumulating on his body over the last few years had melted back off and he was in the best shape of his life. He had thick muscles that contrasted Miguel's long, ropy cords of muscle, and they stood out with definition through his skin, which was not naturally given to tanning but was certainly getting darker.

And Catalina certainly appreciated it. She told him he was starting to look like a true Brazilian. She also appreciated his English quirks, such as nicknaming her "Cat"—although she reminded him more of a

lioness than any tame little housecat—and insisting on drinking tea. Actually, Catalina seemed to appreciate most things about him, and he about her. They'd been together for a few months, now, and they weren't at all bored with one another, in bed or out of it. There was always some new delight to discover about her, such as her affinity for black-and-white Hollywood films or that she hated the chore of painting her toenails. And there was always something he could do for her, such as enlisting Harry's help in using the computer to get a list of movies to rent, or buying nail polish and convincing her to let him paint her nails for her.

He wasn't sure how Miguel honestly felt about Sirius' relationship with his twin, but he'd never said a word against it, and he'd been more than thrilled to see Catalina quit her other job. Sirius didn't consider himself a jealous man, and didn't get upset if she had male friends, but he drew the line at being the live-in boyfriend of a hooker. Miguel was at least pleased as far as that went. Whether or not he approved of Sirius as a suitor was something else.

He wasn't going to find out from Miguel today. It turned out his friend had other concerns on his mind.

"We need to talk about Harry," he said slowly. Sirius knew Miguel spoke English nearly impeccably, and so it wasn't a lack of skill but a hesitation to speak at all. "I am worried for him."

"How so?" Sirius asked, his heart sinking. Harry had been brooding lately, but was never big on communication, so it was hard to discern the reason. Maybe he'd revealed something to Miguel.

"His fighting."

Sirius thought for a moment that he meant lessons with Miguel, then thought he might mean the couple of fights Harry had been in at school, but Miguel frowned, and tried to clarify, and it turned out to be something else entirely.

“In his heart, I mean. He wants to fight, and he doesn’t get the opportunity too much. His heart is fighting itself. I think it is over his parents.”

That amount of honesty had been difficult, but necessary with the twins. They’d accepted the explanation that Harry’s birth parents had been murdered and Sirius had adopted him, and had even been sympathetic. They shared something in common with Harry, their parents having died as well. But it was hard to relate with the cause of Harry’s parents’ death. Theirs had been in a car accident.

“He wants to find their killer. He wishes for revenge.”

“I know he does,” Sirius said with a sigh, not feeling this was a prudent time to mention he himself still harboured similar feelings toward Peter Pettigrew.

“But I think it is more than that. I think he wants to fight something bigger. The way he pushes himself for excellence . . . And sometimes, I have had to tell him more than once to stay out of a certain neighborhood. I think he wants to be threatened by the gangs.” Miguel shrugged, his face puzzled and worried. “Does he want to be shot, or die? I don’t understand what he’s thinking.”

Sirius rubbed his hands over his face, grimacing at the feel of drying sweat on his temples and cheeks. He’d been afraid of this. He’d tried so hard to keep Harry from that darkness, and here it was coming into his life despite all Sirius’ efforts.

“I’ll talk to him. Thanks, Miguel.”

He knew Miguel was curious about this, that Harry’s attitude and Sirius’ acceptance of it just raised more questions, but Sirius wasn’t about to answer them. How was he supposed to explain magic and prophecy and Harry’s not-fully-formed ideas about his role in that world?

“We need to talk,” Sirius said as soon as Harry answered his knock on the bedroom door. Harry’s face was sheened with sweat, so he’d

obviously been working out in some way. That just deepened his concern. Harry was becoming obsessed with his body's strength and speed, and that wasn't going to be much help if he ever did end up facing Voldemort.

"About what?" Harry frowned, stepping aside to allow him in.

"You."

"I haven't been getting in any fights," Harry said automatically. "And my music teacher says I've been improving."

"This isn't about school," Sirius said, sitting down on the edge of Harry's crisply-made bed. He'd insisted Harry do his part in keeping Catalina's house clean (there was little mistaking it was Catalina's, not theirs collectively) by keeping his room neat. "This is about . . . well, just you."

Harry frowned, and didn't sit down by him. He leaned against his dresser.

"You've been isolated, Harry. You haven't been talking to me much. And you're spending a lot of time practicing, with Miguel or without him. I'm just concerned about how hard you're working on this."

Harry scowled at him. "You asked Miguel to teach me, and I'm doing really well at it. I'm keeping up at school, so I don't see why—"

"I don't mind that you're doing well. That's fine. I'm glad that you've found something you like so much that keeps you active. I'm worried that you're trying to train yourself to . . . well, to go up against Voldemort."

Harry rolled his eyes. "As if I could fight a wizard with a headlock," he said scathingly. "I just like it, that's all."

"Listen, Harry." Sirius didn't know how to go about this. Didn't know what to say. "I was glad you enjoyed the lessons, and I wanted you to continue them because I thought it would give you something to focus

on other than all this stuff with the prophecy. I didn't want you brooding on that too much before you were ready. I thought your martial arts were a good outlet for your worries about that."

"They have been," Harry said smoothly, looking at Sirius with calm eyes. "I like doing it. I want to be good at it, whether I can ever use it against someone like Voldemort or not. I'm going to be a real warrior, Sirius, not just a wizard who only knows how to do one thing."

And that was reaching closer to the heart of the problem, but not quite there.

"Why do you want to be so good at it? Why a warrior? You could be anything, Harry, and you're choosing to fight."

Harry scowled at him and this time there was real malice in the expression. "Don't you have sex to be having with Catalina or something?" he muttered.

"Harry Potter!" Sirius barked, jerking up off the bed.

"Well, say what you really want to say, or don't!" Harry snapped back, not afraid of him in the least.

"Fine!" Sirius shouted, then halted. He licked his lips. His godson was turning into someone dark and dangerous, and he had to say something now, while he still could. Before it was too late to reach Harry. "I'm concerned . . . that you want to hurt people."

Harry stared at him like he'd grown a second head. "Why would I want to do that?"

"You've always been a little bit melancholy, Harry, but lately you've been . . . dark."

Harry opened his mouth to argue, then closed it again. His face was draining of colour, and his eyes took on a wet sheen. "Lately . . . I feel that way," he admitted, nearly whispering. "I can't help thinking about

all the things that happened in England, what happened to my parents. Someone tried to kill me. I'm . . . I think I'm afraid."

"I knew you were too young to hear all that," Sirius muttered. He reached out his hand, but didn't step forward or gesture beyond that. "I was worried it was going to make you think you had to be part of it."

Harry took one tentative step, then he was collapsing against Sirius and relaxing in his embrace. "I know I don't have to, but I don't know if I want to or not. I'm just confused."

"You're allowed," Sirius said, patting his back.

"I'm glad we're here, though," Harry said, his voice sounding muffled in Sirius' shirt. "I'm glad we have Miguel and Catalina."

"Me, too."

"Are you happy, Sirius?"

"I . . . yeah, I think I am."

"Good," Harry said firmly, and didn't speak again.

Chapter Eleven

Ron thrust his hand into the air as high as he could, waved it around, and screwed up his face in hopeful delight. The overall effect of earnestness was ruined by the way he rolled his eyes around and grunted as he was doing so. However, that he did resemble Hermione Granger trying to answer a Professor's question was indisputable.

Dean and Seamus burst out laughing. When Ron added, in a high-pitched, squealing voice, "Oh, please, Professor, pick me, pick me, I know everything except why my mother mated with a gerbil!" they fell into giggles and tried to hold each other up from collapsing with the humour of it all. A couple of other students walking through the courtyard saw Ron. Those who'd seen Granger in action snickered as they passed.

The girl in question brushed by the three boys, her face set and her eyes so intent on the door inside that her gaze was nearly burning a hole through it. She nearly knocked Ron over and he saw fat tears welling up and beginning to spill down her cheeks. He hoped the others didn't see it, but apparently they did, since they both sobered up, coughed, and changed the subject quickly.

"Well, she ought to know what she looks like," Ron grouched before giving up the topic and joining the new conversation.

He saw Longbottom as they went through the doors. The boy's sorrowful, reprimanding look made Ron flush angrily. Who was Longbottom to tell all his classmates about right and wrong? He was a stupid, slow, old man in a boy's body, and nobody liked him anymore than they did Granger. If he was so out of touch, how was he to know what was funny and what wasn't, anyway?

It was later, in the Great Hall during the Feast, that Weasley started to feel badly, Neville thought. One minute he was happily stuffing his face with the wealth of Halloween treats, the next he was casting what he thought were surreptitious glances at the empty expanse of the bench beside Parvati Patil. Parvati had noticed the absence much earlier, of course, and Neville had asked in a very loud and obvious

voice where she was. Parvati didn't shout back, but Weasley was paying attention by then, anyway. Now he was eating with maybe a touch less gusto, although he'd only shrugged and made a face upon hearing where his victim was.

Neville didn't really hate anything, or he'd probably hate Ron. What kind of person would make a girl cry just to impress his dormmates? Neville was aware he wasn't impressive, himself, but you didn't see him embarrassing Granger to the point where she couldn't come out of the bathroom for crying. He'd have gone in there to see if he could do anything, if it weren't the girl's lavatory.

Neville had never expected this school to be so immensely frustrating. He'd known he wasn't normal, but this was something else altogether. It wasn't just that he was odd, but that he was distinctly not a child. The rest of them had their petty concerns about homework and whether or not they liked each other or liked what they were having for breakfast . . . Neville had no cares for those things. He was too busy applying himself to his studies with all his concentration. He'd never been bright, and he knew it. Only hard work and determination could get him through and make him anything like what Professor Dumbledore said he must be someday. The other students just laughed at how hard he tried, and he thought the teachers just felt sorry for him that he had to try so hard. They all knew the stories about what had happened when he was a baby, and how he'd come under threat again when he was eight years old, and yet they only felt pity! Didn't any of them, student or professor, grasp what was at stake?

No, likely not. Professor Dumbledore had asked him not to parade his importance around. To keep it quiet and secret. So that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named wouldn't catch a whisper of it, and Neville could be left alone long enough to become what he needed to be.

And when he'd achieved that? When he'd become the warrior Dumbledore dreamed of? Neville didn't know, but he suspected that they weren't planning on a bright future and stellar career for him. Someday, sooner or later, he'd go up against a powerful and frightening wizard, and they didn't expect him to walk away from it. He looked around at his fellow students again. A boy was waving a

book over a girl's head and threatening to feed it to the giant squid in the lake. A couple of kids over at the Slytherin table were playing some kind of card game as the food was consumed and space became available. Kids. All of them, just kids. They didn't know what it was like.

The doors to the Great Hall burst open with a bang, making everyone jump. Neville grabbed his wand and whirled around to face the threat, but it was only Professor Quirrell. He frowned. The timid man rushed forward, aiming for the staff table, face dead white. This was not a man used to running. He made it to Professor Dumbledore and nearly fell on him.

"Troll—" he wheezed, panting for breath. His eyes were nearly rolling in his head, he looked so frightened. "In the dungeons—thought you ought to know."

He fell to the floor, obviously out cold.

There was instant pandemonium. Neville did not let go of his wand as he rose to his feet, but he didn't panic, either. He awaited instructions from the man who'd been instructing him what seemed like all his life. That man took control very quickly and directed all the students back to their dormitories and the teachers down to the dungeons to deal with the rampaging magical creature. He looked directly at Neville when he said to follow the prefects, so Neville figured the directive applied to him as much as the other students. Well, really, what would be the point of showing himself trained in magical battle against something as simple as a troll? Nobody needed to know that, yet. Secrecy. With Dumbledore, it all came down to secrecy. Not giving anybody an edge over him.

But as Neville allowed himself to be herded through the doors and along the path to the dorms, inwardly scoffing at the fright on the faces of his classmates—it was just a troll, not a giant, nor yet He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named—he remembered something. Hermione Granger, hiding in the bathroom. If that troll got out of the dungeon, its lack of ability to frighten Neville wouldn't matter, not to her. It would kill her in an instant. And Neville knew that secrecy would never come before human life for his mentor, so when Percy Weasley

led them around a corner, he simply didn't follow. He turned and headed for the bathroom.

If Fred and George had been with the group of students being herded back to Gryffindor Tower, they might have noticed that Neville snuck away. As it was, they weren't, so they didn't. They'd started out to be, following along behind their older brother and grumbling that if the school taught Defense Against the Dark Arts, they might allow the students some real-life practice once in a while. But then they saw something that caught their attention. Something that made them think.

"Where d'you reckon that ugly git is off to?" Fred murmured, nudging George to look in the right direction.

"Snape?" George frowned. "Well, not the dungeon, anyway."

"Observant today, aren't you?"

"Shut it," George grunted, watching Snape with narrowed eyes. "Come on."

Fred followed when George slipped out of the crowd, but as they tailed Snape, he argued. "We can't afford a detention like this. You know what Mum will do if she finds out we went off on our own with a troll loose?"

"She'll probably tell us off for leaving poor ickle Ronnie with only half the school to defend him," George whispered, but his voice sounded strangely absent.

"Why the hell are we following Snape, again?"

They both ducked behind a statue when Snape stopped abruptly. They held their breath. After a moment, he continued on again, and they flitted from statue to tapestry to statue, staying just out of sight.

"To find out what he's doing, of course. He's going to the 'forbidden' third floor they've got all locked up."

“Ah,” Fred said, his eyes gleaming. “Now’s our chance to find out what they’ve got hidden up here.”

“Exactly.” But George frowned. “He’s obviously up to something, so we’re going to find out what.”

“Why?”

“Because nobody else is going to,” George said baldly, looking at his twin for the first time since they’d left the Great Hall. “If he’s about to blow us all up, I’d like to know about it, anyway. You think we ought to go to Dumbledore or something? He’s too busy with his useless little pet boy. Which Snape has obviously noticed and decided to take advantage of.”

Fred was the more publicly vocal of the twins, and he’d had many of these thoughts already, but in private, it was George who laid them all out so they could think about it. And the conclusion he’d half-arrived at, when George led up to it, became clear.

“So it’s really up to us, then, isn’t it?” he said softly.

Then, up the corridor where Snape opened a locked door, several massive dogs started barking. This was a surprise, but not as great a surprise as the other person who came striding up the corridor.

Neville’s grip on his wand was precarious, as his hand was sweating. He held it in his other hand for a moment so he could wipe the sweat off on his robes. He also swiped the cuff of them across his forehead for good measure. He regained his grip, and took a deep breath. He had to relax. He wouldn’t be any good in a fight if he was upset or frightened or panicked. Dumbledore had drilled that into his head enough times.

“Ergh,” he muttered when he caught the troll’s scent. It smelled . . . well, there weren’t words. It was disgusting. And it was in the bathroom.

A high-pitched shriek and a horrible crunching noise propelled him into action. He burst through the door to see Hermione crouched on the floor with her arms over her head, broken bits of the bathroom skittering across the floor. The huge, ugly troll was waving a dirty great club around and its mean, piggy eyes were fixed on the girl. When it raised its club to crush her, Neville raised his wand.

“Expelliarmus!” he shouted, and the club shot across the bathroom and hit the wall. Chips exploded around it and it clattered to the floor in a shower of dust, leaving a mark on the wall. Befuddled, the troll turned around, its big, splayed feet scuffing in the debris it had made. When it caught sight of him with his wand out, it bellowed in rage. Neville, despite himself took a step back. It was huge. It was ugly. It was angry. And it was coming at him.

“Stupefy!” he shouted desperately.

The jet of light struck the troll on its chest and had no apparent effect. It bellowed again.

“So not good,” Neville mumbled to himself. He racked his brains. Merlin’s pants, he knew a hundred spells, how could he not think of a single one to stop a stupid troll? He flicked his wand to try to Stun it again, and the troll backhanded him across the face. He flew across the bathroom and crashed into the wall of a stall.

His vision went briefly black, then stars exploded, which was no better. He grabbed his head in both hands, trying to keep it from falling off, and groaned. He heard Hermione scream again and tottered to his feet, his ears ringing. He lifted his hand, and discovered to his horror that his wand was no longer in it. He staggered forward, searching through the spots in his eyes, looking for his wand in the debris. He saw it, and his heart hammered. It was about three inches behind Hermione, who was nearly flat on the floor with her arms over her head again.

“Hermione!” he shouted. “The wand!” The troll was between them, or he would have dove for it. At least the shout distracted the beast

long enough for Hermione to locate the wand and pick it up. Neville stared at her. Could she do any good with it?

She didn't seem to know a single spell that would stop the troll. She held Neville's wand in her shaking grip, then her eyes caught on the troll's club again. She pointed the wand there, making Neville frown. What was she thinking?

"Wingardium Leviosa!" she cried, and with a practiced swish, she levitated the club up and across the room to the troll, where she dropped the hunk of knotted wood on its head. It made a peculiar grunting noise and fell over. A cloud of dust rolled over Neville's feet and gave the bottom of his robes a stripe of gray.

"You knocked it out," Neville said in shock, and picked his way through the debris toward the pale, shaking girl. "Good work." His head ached fiercely and his ears were still ringing from the awful bellows of the troll and the blow he'd taken. But he knelt down beside Hermione, gently extricated his wand from her white-knuckled grip, and patted her awkwardly on the shoulder.

"What are you doing here?" Hermione asked him.

"Professor Quirrell said there was a troll, and we were on our way to our houses, and I remembered you were in here."

Hermione looked weak and shaken, but she smiled at him. "Thank you for coming to save me."

He looked at the unconscious, smelly beast in disgust. "Fat lot of good I did."

"It would have killed me if you hadn't come," she whispered.

Professor McGonagall rushed in, several other teachers on her heels. She simply stared at the two of them, kneeling in the wreckage beside the body of the troll, then she shook her head and sighed.

“I’ll kill Albus,” she muttered, and Neville was certain it was in his best interest to pretend she hadn’t. “Miss Granger, what on earth are you doing here?”

“I . . . I was using . . . Neville came to rescue me.”

McGonagall looked extraordinarily unsurprised.

“I’m glad to see you’re both—” She stopped and frowned. “Mr. Longbottom, you are bleeding.”

Neville hadn’t noticed until now, but the back of his neck felt wet and warm. He touched his fingers to the back of his head and discovered it was bleeding everywhere and the shoulders of his robes were starting to glisten with sticky wetness. “Oh,” he said faintly. The sight of his own blood made him nauseated and nearly as close to blacking out as he’d been when he hit the wall.

“Miss Granger, you and I will return to the Gryffindor dormitory immediately. Severus, if you would escort Mr. Longbottom to the hospital wing?”

Neville cringed as he got unsteadily to his feet and followed Professor Snape on wooden legs. Professor Snape did not like him and thought he was rubbish at Potions (which he was), and took every opportunity to make it clear to Neville and the rest of the school. Despite his own problems, though, Neville did manage to notice one thing. Snape was limping.

Ron had talked Percy into playing a game of chess with him. They were sitting in the Great Hall, since Percy seemed to want to be visible to someone (not that he was likely to confide in Ron as to who that might be, but Ron was bright enough to suspect a girl), and the game was not going well. Ron was a decent chess player, but Percy was the one who’d taught him to play, and he was both older and better at it. One side of the board was littered with broken pieces of Ron’s chess set. Percy, so mild-looking in person, was an absolutely brutal chess player.

“No, really, I’m fine,” he heard the Granger girl telling somebody, right behind him. He quickly cast a look over her shoulder to see her assuring Longbottom of her well-being. “I didn’t get hurt at all. How’s your head?”

Ron turned back to the game with his mood, already darkened by his losses on the chess board, turning yet more sour. Everyone knew what had happened last night. How he’d been the reason Granger was trapped in the bathroom with the troll, and how Longbottom had saved her. Heroically, of course. He was even sporting a black eye as his badge of honour. Ron’s poor reputation was dipping even further, and he knew it should have been him in the bathroom last night. He should have been the one to save the Granger girl, since it had been his fault she was in danger. And maybe then everyone would start thinking he wasn’t just a dull little first year. Maybe then they’d be looking at him with awe and whispering about his injuries. But, no. It was the bloody other-Boy-Who-Lived who’d gotten the glory last night (though perhaps his reputation had needed the lift, too).

“You certainly know how to pick your friends, Granger.”

Ron’s whole body stiffened at the sound of that lazy drawl. He was always acting so unconcerned by everything, trying to look cool. He looked, Ron decided viciously, like a rat. A white rat with beady little eyes and a pointy snout.

“First the Weasel boy, and now this plodding bore?”

“I suppose you think I should be friends with you?” was Granger’s tart response.

“Ugh, no, of course not. I’d never be friends with a—”

“Draco!” Longbottom snapped.

“—Mudblood.”

Several people gasped at his language, but Malfoy was already moving on. Ron felt the other boy at his shoulder, looking over the

chess board. Percy was ignoring the whole thing and studying his next move, but Ron lost all focus with Malfoy hovering like that.

“I see you’re just as useless at chess as you are with everything else,” Malfoy said cheerfully.

“You must be an excellent chess player, then,” Longbottom spoke up. “Let’s see you beat the fifth-year.”

“Please,” Malfoy drawled. “It’s a game. For children.”

He sauntered away, content to leave devastation in his wake. Granger was insulted, Longbottom disrespected, Ron himself ridiculed. All in a day’s work for that one, Ron thought, and tried to plan his countermove to what Percy had just done. But somehow, his heart wasn’t in the game anymore.

Chapter Twelve

Harry slapped his hand on the mat, and Miguel let him up. Harry bounced up, ready for another bout. He kept his balance on the balls of his feet and kept his arms tight to his sides for a block or a strike.

Miguel had trained any notions he'd had of when a fight was over right out of him. He'd catch him off guard at the strangest moments—in the middle of instructing him in a new technique, while they were walking back into the house after practice, at the sink washing dishes—and Harry was very rarely not on guard, anymore. He couldn't be, after the night Miguel came into his room while he was asleep and woke him up with an arm across his neck, and told him his reflexes needed work.

It was a hard lesson, but one Harry had adapted to much more easily than most people would. Enemies could be anywhere, at any time. One must always be ready to move. He didn't know why Miguel had stressed that so much (and his godfather hoped Harry remained ignorant of his request), but he'd learned it well, and it showed in more places than just their garage. At school, he always knew where the bullies were and if they were ready to pick on any of his classmates. He knew when a teacher was looking at him and ready to ask a question. He always knew where the exit doors were in any building he entered. It wasn't something he did consciously. He was just always supremely aware of where everyone else in a room was and how much space he had to move within if he got into a fight.

Miguel just shook his head and grinned. "We are finished today," he declared, wiping at the streams of sweat coursing from his temples down his cheeks. "You gave me a good workout," he chuckled, his breath a bit short. "You're getting good at this."

Harry grinned, and acknowledged the compliment with a little dip of his head. They went back into the house for a drink of water, and Harry toyed with the idea of kicking Miguel's legs out from under him, but dismissed it. Miguel was a good teacher, and there was no reason to pick a fight by pointing out that he wasn't nearly as good at being on his guard as Harry was, now.

Miguel lowered the glass he was drinking from, and gave Harry a rueful smile. "I think I'm teaching you too well," he said. "But don't think I don't see you there."

Harry blushed. Of course Miguel was ready for him. He was just better at not showing it, at acting casual. Harry knew that was his next step. Hiding that he was even watching. Ready for a fight while looking like he was anything but. What an advantage that would be! he thought fervently. Well, he would get there.

"I'll have to learn it for myself," he muttered.

"Hmmm?" Miguel queried around his glass. He swallowed. "You think there's something I can't teach you?"

"Attitude," Harry said with a smile.

Miguel laughed. "You've got plenty of that on your own," he assured Harry, ruffling his hair.

Why was everybody always doing that? he scowled.

"You're telling me," Sirius said, and they both turned to acknowledge him. They'd known he was there. He might flatter himself into thinking they didn't, but he was slowly learning that awareness for himself. Miguel didn't beat it into him the way he did with Harry, for some reason Harry hadn't figured out. If he ever did find out that Sirius had frankly asked Miguel to do what he could to prepare Harry for a dangerous life, he probably wouldn't be altogether surprised.

"He's got enough attitude for three kids," Sirius said, stepping across the room and pulling Harry in for an affectionate hug. "But since I can only handle one at a time, it all got packed in here."

Harry made grunting noises of disapproval at the teasing, but they were half-hearted at best. Miguel updated Sirius on Harry's progress while Sirius finished off Harry's glass of water and refilled it.

“He’s becoming quite a warrior,” Miguel said, sounding proud, but his face was serious. Harry’s godfather reacted to that by tightening his arms until Harry was almost suffocating, but he slipped free easily and resumed replenishing his body of the water he’d been sweating out. He knew why Sirius was worried, but he was doing a lot better, really. No reason to squeeze him to death.

“Not like I’m getting the training I really need, anyway,” he muttered. Sirius gave him a sharp look that he returned. It was true.

When Sirius walked into the kitchen for something to eat and found Miguel slumped at the table with a half-empty bottle of cheap cachaça in his hand, his heart skipped a beat. Miguel had no objection to drinking, far from it, but Sirius had never seen him drink to excess. Not once in a year of knowing him. Now the slightly younger man was completely pissed. Something was wrong here.

Very quietly, he joined Miguel at the table. He knew the problem wasn’t Catalina, since he’d left her lying in bed only a moment ago. He knew it wasn’t Miguel, since his one true worry was behind him—his acceptance letter had come yesterday and he was enrolled in three classes at a nearby college, starting in three weeks. In fact, their little family seemed to be thriving.

Last time Miguel had needed to talk to him, it had been about Harry. Sirius prayed mightily that Miguel wasn’t getting drunk to prepare himself for a conversation about Harry. The nearly-twelve-year-old had taken that talk a few months ago to heart and had applied himself to spending more time out of his room and with the family. He was almost doing well in music class, even. Sirius had thought he was doing better.

Miguel looked up at him, his eyes reddened and tired. “Are you done fucking with my sister?” he growled.

“What?” Sirius stammered. He scrambled to come up with a single memory of a moment when Miguel had acted disapproving of the relationship he had with Catalina, and couldn’t find one. This was coming out of nowhere! What had gotten into Miguel?

“You have two choices, Sirius,” he said, his voice slow and careful, the S’s becoming long and hissing. “You can marry her or you can go.”

His first feeling was of relief that Miguel’s first question had been figurative rather than literal and that he wouldn’t actually have to discuss his physical relationship with the woman’s brother. The second one was gut-twisting panic at the options being laid before him, followed by anger and disgust with himself for not knowing which answer was right. To cover his roiling emotions, he asked his own question.

“What brought this on?”

“I told Catalina . . . I said to her, why don’t you enroll in school, too? We both put it off long enough.” Then Miguel lapsed into Portuguese, although he didn’t seem to be aware of it. He continued relating the conversation. Sirius had been learning some, but with Miguel’s drunken, slurring speech, he was completely lost.

“Um, Miguel, I don’t understand you.”

Miguel didn’t offer to translate, but Sirius didn’t really need him to. Catalina had said she wasn’t interested in going back to school, obviously, and likely it was because she was happy with the life she already had. She didn’t have time to go to work and contribute a third of their income, and be the heart of this family, and go to school. She’d already mentioned some of this to Sirius before.

“So, if you’re going to be here and take care of her, then you will marry her. If you’re not, then you leave now so she can make a better life before she gets too old.” Miguel finally set the bottle down on the table, but only so he could get unsteadily to his feet and come around the table to where Sirius sat. He clapped a hand on Sirius’ shoulder, holding himself up as much as getting his point across. “I like you, and you’ve been good for her. You’re . . .” He belched. “. . . good man. If you want to marry her, we’ll be a real family. But I know how you move around. If you’re moving on again, do it now. Before Catalina

gives up too many opportunities to be with you. You understand, don't you?"

At one time, Sirius would have turned this into a fight, his injured pride and honour would be the first thing on his mind. But he thought he'd matured beyond that. Besides, Miguel wasn't trying to insult him, or didn't seem to be. He was drunk and doing a lousy job of explaining himself, but not intentionally trying to say anything bad about Sirius or Catalina. He just cared about his sister. Wanted the best for her. Sirius could understand, since he wanted the same thing.

"I need to think," was all he said, but his head was already turning toward the door to Harry's room. He took a few pulls from the tequila bottle before he stood up. It was all very well to talk about dependency on alcohol and the evils of liquor, but once in a while (as Miguel seemed to have discovered), you needed a little liquid courage.

When Sirius walked into Harry's room with his face grim and his shoulders hunched against the confusing battle in his head, Harry immediately stood up, walked over to him, and raised his face. He sniffed.

"You've been drinking."

"I had a shot of that petrol Miguel's drinking, about three seconds ago," Sirius answered.

Harry shrugged and stood aside, gesturing to his bed so Sirius could sit down.

"Miguel and I were talking . . ." Sirius sighed. "I don't have the energy to explain it all. Go ahead and look," he invited, trying to relax his mind for the invasion.

Thirty seconds of silence later, when he realized Harry was staring at the wall, he frowned.

"Aren't you going to look?"

“I’m done,” Harry said casually. “I’m just thinking.”

Sirius kept himself from gasping in shock with supreme effort. Harry had gotten good enough that he hadn’t even noticed the Legilimency being used. Of course, he was no great Occlumens himself, and he’d issued the invitation, but he still reckoned that wasn’t too shabby for a kid Harry’s age. I could kiss that Japanese priest. Except that it makes Harry just that much more unusual . . . at least he’s at school, spending time with his own peers now. Who knows what he’d act like if he never saw other kids?

“Do you love her, Sirius?”

Sirius didn’t know what to look at, so he looked at his hands. They were calloused and rough and two of the nails were blackened with bruises from getting his fingers smashed under a crate. His forearms were a mess of bruises and welts from sparring with Miguel. And he honestly didn’t mind. He liked this life. He liked this house, and Catalina . . .

“She’s so beautiful,” he mumbled. “And she’s got so much . . . spirit, I guess. I’m grateful to be living free anywhere, of course, but when it’s with her, I’m really alive. And there’s so much to love about this place, this city. Her, most of all.”

“I won’t look into your head again,” Harry replied calmly. “Do you love her?”

“I do.”

“Then that’s that, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“If you love her, then love her.”

Sirius stared at his godson, who looked back at him with determination through his glasses and the shaggy hair that hung low

over his forehead and hid that scar. He was so proud of this boy, who was hardly a boy anymore and certainly not the child he'd been when they met.

"You didn't learn your ideas about love from me, that's for sure. I've got a history of being bad at it."

"You've got a history of not getting attached to women you're going to leave," Harry corrected him. "You're not leaving Catalina."

"I don't want to," Sirius said, his voice barely above a whisper. "But what about you?"

"What about me? I'll be on my own soon enough, anyway. Don't . . ." Now Harry seemed to struggle for words at last. "Don't give up your home for me again. Don't give up someone you love so much. Please."

This was the first hint Harry had ever given that he felt guilty for his place in Sirius' life. It was true, after a fashion, that Sirius had given up many things for Harry, but . . .

"I've never regretted it," Sirius said, his voice so rough with emotion that he was growling. His scarred, battered hands clenched into fists. "I love you like you were my own, and I've never once regretted this. Don't believe for a minute that I could. So long as I'm raising you as best I can, trying to make James and Lily proud, being here to watch you grow up—that's all the life I need. You know that, don't you?"

"I do," Harry said, his voice quiet. "But we have Catalina and Miguel now. And I can't— Can't see you that lonely again. Stay, Sirius. Stay here."

They embraced for a long time, not saying anything. Then Sirius broke the embrace and moved toward the door, feeling like he'd never felt before. "I . . . um, I have to go make a marriage proposal." He almost thought he'd giggled, but of course he hadn't, he didn't act silly and never had. But he felt like he was moving in a haze, like his feet didn't touch the ground. He was going to ask Catalina to marry

him, and he was going to stay here, and he was going to allow himself to believe he'd found a home again like he hadn't known since before the war.

Maybe he was finally done punishing himself for letting James down.

Catalina was laying in bed, reading a book. Sirius tilted his head to see what it was. Borges. She really was a marvelously well-read woman, he thought with admiration. She'd barely finished high school, but she'd been raised in the hopes she'd marry into a higher class. Her father had counted on her being beautiful and intelligent to catch the eye of someone much more important than him. Then he was dead, she was practically in the streets, and still she read high-brow literature and practiced the violin from time to time.

She was an excellent cook, too, he thought with contentment as he slid into the bed beside her. She worked as a waitress at a really nice restaurant, so she ought to be sick of looking at food by the time she came home, but instead she was always cooking something. She made the most amazing empanadas. But maybe what he really loved about her was that when he'd told her he'd gone to jail for some murders he hadn't actually committed, she'd just kissed his cheek, said she believed him, and made him dinner. She was just so very loving and accepting and beautiful and everything he wanted.

He just watched her read. He'd been with her for very close to a year, now, and he still hadn't discovered anything he didn't like about her. Her tongue was sharp and cutting, certainly, but only when he deserved it. She had kind of a rocky history with men, but she hadn't had a father to scare off her boyfriends and her brother had been too busy trying to keep them from starving. He couldn't blame her for it.

"I love you," he murmured with contentment, his breath causing a few hairs loose from her braid to dance across her neck.

She went stiff, for a moment. She laid her book aside very carefully, and slithered sideways so she lay with her face next to his. No arguments here, he thought lazily, smiling at her. "You've never said that before," she said, an uncertain smile on her (beautiful) lips.

“No, I haven’t. Doesn’t mean it isn’t true.”

She smiled back, and they lost themselves for a few moments in the pleasantries of reminding themselves what they found so enjoyable about each other’s company. Her lips weren’t just beautiful, they were skilled, Sirius thought, but when she showed signs of being willing to let this go further, he pulled away.

“I want to talk,” he said, feeling his heart twisting. He was . . . could it be he was frightened? Why should he be? He knew she loved him. He knew that when he asked her, she would say yes. He knew that. Why ought he to be afraid?

Because he wasn’t going to ask, he realized, and his heart twisted until it hurt. Harry’s reckless comment a couple of days ago had sunk in too deeply. Harry wasn’t getting the training he needed. He had muscles and reflexes Sirius had never before seen on a kid his age, but Harry was no wizard. And he needed to be. It was the life he’d been born into, the life they’d both been born into. And Catalina . . . she couldn’t fit in, there. She might come, if he asked. But she’d never be the powerful woman she was here. Did he dare ask, anyway? Ask her to join him in a world that would never be hers, and watch her slowly wilt away in a place she’d never be part of?

Or he could leave her here. Let her go and let her become accomplished in her own way. Free her to pursue her own life, and find happiness with a man who’d be much better for her than Sirius could ever be. Because no matter how much he loved her and wanted to be with her, and no matter how much Harry loved him and tried to release him to do so . . . Harry was his responsibility first. When he’d escaped Azkaban, it was Harry that had saved him. Harry was his child, now, and he had the raising of him. It was a tricky, difficult job, but it was his. He couldn’t abandon it. It was his penance for getting James and Lily killed, but it was also what made his life worth living and had been for years. He loved Harry, and loving Catalina didn’t excuse Sirius from doing what was right for him.

Catalina was watching him, waiting for him to speak. Did she know what was coming? he wondered with regret. Did she have any idea

what he was going to say? Her eyes were calm, her face still, but there was so much tension in her shoulders. She knew something was wrong.

“I have to leave,” he whispered. Then he closed his eyes to wait out her tears and fists and whatever else she would shower on him until she gave him the chance to explain. He started trying to think of what to say.

The truth was all that came to him, while he let her slap him and shout and cry. “You know how you found that stick, and I told you it was a magic wand? I was being serious . . .”

Chapter Thirteen

“Maybe we should work on the fireworks we’ve started developing,” George suggested, alarmed by Fred’s idea. “They’d be distracted enough to stay put until we convinced the other teachers they were up there stealing it.”

“Do you want to distract them or stop them?” Fred grunted, flipping another page of the book they’d stolen from the Restricted Section when Madam Pince was looking the other way.

“Stop them,” George said in a subdued voice. Despite having reasoned it out a hundred times, he still wished it wasn’t he and his brother involved in this. What they were up against was too much. “But still, we ought to try talking to McGonagall or somebody again.”

“Yeah, because you love being ignored,” Fred said bitingly.

George subsided. They’d had their concerns ignored all year, and subsequently had been awfully busy trying to stop this plot on their own. The hardest part had been being entirely unsure who they could talk to about it. If Snape and Quirrell were both in on it, who else among the teachers might be?

It had been fairly short work to discover the meaning of Fluffy’s presence in the school. Hagrid was really a stupid lunker underneath all that beard, especially if you got him drunk. It was working out what Snape and Quirrell wanted with the Philosopher’s Stone that was the issue. That had taken all manner of spying, sneaking, and reading the bloody newspaper front to back nearly every day. But once again, it had been Hagrid who proved most useful, there. He’d mentioned the unicorns in the Forbidden Forest being hurt to one of the other teachers within their hearing. A simple sly question to that bookish little girl in their house who knew everything (Granger, her name was) had told them what a unicorn’s blood was good for. The rest was conjecture, but they were confident of their conclusion.

He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was back. And he was in their forest, drinking the blood of unicorns. He had put Snape and Quirrell to the

task of stealing the stone for him to regain his powers. He was really back.

All that was worrisome enough, but even more frightening was that Fred and George seemed to be the only ones interested. They'd tried talking to McGonagall. They'd tried Flitwick. As a last resort, they'd even tried Hagrid. The only person they hadn't gone to yet was Dumbledore himself, whom they regarded as clever enough to have figured it out by now on his own.

"Not clever enough to have done a damn thing, though," George sighed.

"What's that?" Fred muttered.

"Nothing," George said. "D'you reckon he's waiting for Neville to solve it?"

"If he is, he's an ass," Fred replied, still not looking up from the book. "Kid couldn't find his way out of a paper sack, and what's he supposed to do if he's up against Voldemort?"

"Whatever he did last time," George shrugged.

Fred finally looked up. "You honestly believe that? About Neville surviving an attack like the Potter kid?"

George shrugged again. "No. Not really."

"Exactly. Dumbledore's an ass. Course, most of the world believes him, even if we don't, so maybe he's brilliant. Either way, we're on our own if we're planning to stop the professors and keep He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named from taking over our school. And then, you know, the country."

"You think he's after the world?" George asked quietly.

"I think he's after whatever he can get his hands on," Fred answered, his voice dropping as well. "And I think I'll be damned if I'm going to

let him. Come on, help me find something we can use to stop those two if they go after the stone again.”

The twins waited. Their palms were sweaty, they were twitching at the slightest sound, and George seemed to be developing a tic in his left eye. They’d been crouched around the corner from Fluffy’s door in the third floor corridor for an hour, and still Snape and Quirrell were in their respective offices. Dumbledore was away, called off on some Ministry business, and they’d been so sure it would be tonight. So here they were, ready to stop the theft.

And the twins waited.

The tic in George’s eye was annoying him, and he kept rubbing his hand over that side of his face with an absent air, reviewing the spells they’d practiced in his head. When Fred grabbed his arm and hissed his name, the tic disappeared instantly, scared off like a case of the hiccups.

“George. Look.”

The map showed Quirrell leaving his office and heading in their direction. George’s heart started hammering. They were right. It was tonight. And Snape . . . He frowned. Snape was still in his office. Was he planning to have Quirrell bring him the Stone later, after he’d proven his innocence? Not likely. Fred and George were on to him.

“Fred?” George muttered, his mouth dry with a thought that had occurred to him before, but never with this urgency. Now they were facing the possibility, and it hit him hard. “What if we have to kill him? Use the Killing Curse to stop him? He can’t get that stone.”

Fred looked at George, saw how pale he was. His face was pale, too, but his forehead wasn’t covered in sweat and his jaw was locked with a firmness that seemed alien to the carefree boy. “If it comes to it . . . I’ll do it.”

“No,” George started to argue, shaking his head and frowning, but Fred clamped his hand on his arm so hard it hurt.

“I’ll do it,” he said again, and stared at him. “Now shut up. We’re relying on the element of surprise here, remember?”

George just nodded, looking away, and Fred let his arm go.

“Here he comes,” he whispered.

As Quirrell came up the corridor, he seemed to be having a conversation with himself. The whispers grew louder with each shuffling footstep toward them, until they could hear what he was saying.

“. . . short work of those ridiculous booby traps down there, then we’ll be free and clear. What if that damned Snape shows up again? He knows, master, he knows, he’ll try to stop me again . . . But I know the importance, I know what I must do, I’ll kill him if I have to . . .”

He continued muttering to himself, but Fred and George were looking at each other in shock. Snape tried to stop him? Snape was on their side?

“George, go get him. Snape. Go tell him what’s happening.”

“So you can deal with Quirrell by yourself? No. Besides, he won’t believe me anyway, and you know it.”

“But we have to try—”

“I’m not leaving you,” George said in a voice that did not exactly invite further conversation. It should have given their position away to Quirrell, but he’d managed to break the lock on the door just then, and the dogs started barking furiously. Well, dog. Or was it considered more than one? No matter, the creature was bloody upset about being intruded on. The twins crept toward the door and saw Quirrell remove the object he’d been carrying slung over his shoulder. A harp. He drew out his wand and waved it over the instrument, and it started playing. The effect was almost comical. The three heads of

the dog blinked several times, a string of drool fell from one enormous pair of lips, and the dog flopped down and went to sleep.

The twins saw Quirrell reaching for the trapdoor. Visions of him going down there, grabbing the stone off a shelf, and making a run for it filled their heads, and they stood in the doorway, wands out. Time to let him have it.

“Professor!” Fred barked out.

Quirrell whirled around, already flinging a spell, but Fred snapped a shield up quickly. They’d been practicing those especially hard, well aware they’d never study enough in a few months to counter everything a grown wizard could throw at them. The spell broke against his shield, and Fred just frowned at him, trying to look stern.

“We know what you’re up to,” George said, his voice extremely loud. He was hoping that if they made enough noise, somebody would notice and show up to help them. It would be hard to call them teenagers with too much imagination when Quirrell was actually standing there caught in the act.

Then George felt himself being violently flipped upside down, and he cried out, expecting his brains to be dashed out on the ground. Instead, he found himself hanging upside down in the air, and Quirrell’s twitchy face had turned mean and leering, and was only inches from his own.

“Do you?” he asked, sounding very unimpressed.

“We’re not going to let you,” George said as bravely as was possible when one was hanging upside down and unable to do anything about it.

Then Fred shouted “Stupefy!” and Quirrell moved to defend himself. George threw his hands up to protect his head as he fell, and he both heard and felt something crunch, and he yelped. When he rolled to his feet, he groaned and knew that his wrist was broken.

There was the sound of hissing, jarring laughter, and the twins both jerked in surprise. Quirrell wasn't laughing. They spun around, but there was nobody there. Then turned back around to find Quirrell sneering at them. Still with his mouth closed, he seemed to be speaking.

"They are only foolish children. Kill them and get me the Stone."

Quirrell nodded as if he'd received an instruction, which he obviously had. Fred and George couldn't fathom how He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named could be issuing orders—audible orders—without being there. Then Quirrell adjusted that ridiculous turban of his, and they looked at each other carefully. It wasn't garlic Quirrell was keeping in there, was it? There wasn't much they did know, but they knew they didn't want that turban to come off.

Quirrell was raising his wand, but George jumped in. "Expelliarmus!"

Quirrell deflected the spell almost lazily. "You are going to die first, boy," he said in a normal, non-stuttering voice. He pointed his wand at George, who readied himself to raise a shield with wide eyes, and then Fred screamed something and a burst of fire jetted out of his wand. Quirrell, taken by surprise, did not deflect it but ducked, and the fire splashed harmlessly against the stone wall.

"Him first, but you will suffer!" he shouted at Fred. Fred threw another burst of fire at him, which he also ducked. George coughed on the acrid smoke that was filling up the room from the fire, and grimaced at the jolt to his wrist. When Quirrell straightened up, he aimed at Fred with a wild light in his eyes and shouted, "Crucio!"

Fred screamed in agony and fell to the ground, and Quirrell laughed, holding his wand over Fred and enjoying the screams as Fred writhed, looking for an escape, any escape. He clutched a desperate hand on Quirrell's ankle, but the man only laughed more. George, horrified, took a step forward and tried to Stupefy him, but the man deflected the spell and then cast one at him that hurled him back into the wall so hard he lost his breath and saw stars.

George cast a spell to try to cut open his face, but Quirrell deflected that one down, and it hit Fred in the leg. Then his screams started again while Quirrell tortured him. George tried to stagger to his feet, shocked and angry at seeing his twin brother in that kind of pain, but he was horribly dizzy and out of breath, and the room tilted until the floor came up to meet him.

“Enough,” came the cold, deadly voice they’d heard before. “Finish them now. I want the stone!”

Quirrell was hardly better than a jibbering idiot, he was so afraid of the voice speaking under his turban, but the eyes he turned on George were gleaming with insanity. He lifted his wand to kill George, and George wished dully that he could get out of the way. He couldn’t get his breath back because of all the smoke in the room, and his head hurt, and his wrist hurt . . . why was there still so much smoke? He looked over and saw that Quirrell’s harp was on fire. The only piece of wood in the room, except that trapdoor.

“Avad—”

“Incarcerous!” Fred’s voice called out, hoarse from screaming.

Quirrell’s words cut off as his suddenly bound legs came out from under him and his arms, bound to his sides, couldn’t break his fall. He tried to hop backward to catch his balance and avoid falling, and he threw himself backward into a mountain of fur. He pressed himself desperately up against the body of Fluffy, knowing he couldn’t stop himself from serious injury if he fell, with his arms bound.

Fluffy.

The harp.

George suddenly placed the growling noise he’d heard.

Then Fluffy snarled, a bone-chilling sound that reverberated in George’s chest and made him appreciate just what a large animal was in the room with them. Quirrell looked up, whimpered.

Fluffy's teeth came down on Quirrell's head, and Quirrell started screaming. The jaws clamped over his torso, and the huge dog shook the screaming man. Droplets of blood spattered across the room, falling over both twins and sizzling as they landed on the smoking remains of the harp. Then Fluffy's second head caught the man's legs and started shaking them, and the screams stopped.

A howling sound tore through the room, and they knew dully that Voldemort was fleeing the body that he'd inhabited for . . . who knew how long? Then Quirrell's body tore in half, and Fred started throwing up. George was numb all over, and the sight did nothing to him. He'd already seen Fred being tortured, what was watching a wretched man being eaten by a dog?

Somewhere in all this, he heard a groaning noise, one that certainly wasn't Fred. He turned his head enough to see that Dumbledore himself was standing in the doorway. Well, more like sagging in the doorway. He was staring at the pieces of Professor Quirrell, but when George turned to look at him, Dumbledore looked back.

"Where have you been?" George snarled. "Nobody believes us, and we've got to do it all on our own, and Fred's getting tortured, and you're off rubbing elbows with the bloody Minister—"

"I knew something was wrong when they were surprised to see me. I came back as soon as I could."

George fell silent. Dumbledore was a lot of things, but he'd never heard Dumbledore sound old before.

Then Dumbledore pulled a penny whistle from a pocket in his robes, held it out in front of him, and cast a spell to make it play. He let it drop to the ground, playing a soft mournful little tune. Fluffy subsided from Quirrell's corpse and lay back down to sleep.

Fred finally managed to pick himself up off the ground, slow and painful, still gasping for breath.

“Oh, hello Professor Dumbledore,” he said in a cheerful voice. “Don’t mind us, we’re just doing your job. Now give us a moment to clean up your mess, and we’ll be right with you. Scourgify,” he added with venom, and a patch of the blood on the floor vanished. “George, if you would?”

The two of them, staring burning holes into their headmaster, cleaned up the greater portion of the blood and ash from the fire.

“We’ll just leave the body for you,” Fred said, his voice still absurdly cheerful. “Wouldn’t want to leave you with nothing to do, would we?”

“I didn’t think . . .”

“Obviously,” George snorted. “I’m sure you’ve got a fascinating explanation for your lack of action, one that probably involves Neville Longbottom, but you’ll have to excuse us. I’ve got to take my brother to the hospital wing.”

He pulled Fred’s arm over his shoulders so he could help him along. Fred was weak and shaky from the spell Quirrell had cast on him, and he was limping badly on the leg cut by George’s deflected spell.

“You’re not in such great shape either, you know,” Fred mumbled. “Your wrist is broken and your face is bleeding.”

“Yeah, and my head hurts,” George replied. “So it’s good we’re going to the hospital wing, isn’t it?”

Professor Snape came striding up the corridor, his black robes billowing out behind him impressively.

“Oh, good, somebody who has a clue what’s going on finally showed up,” Fred said.

Snape stared at them. “Quirrell?”

“Is dead,” George answered. “Fluffy ate him. He got us pretty good, though. Any chance you might help me get Fred to Madam Pomfrey before he bleeds to death?”

And so when Dumbledore came to thank them for their efforts, he had to also admit that Snape had done his part and thank him as well. The twins didn't think that bit of gratitude sat well with either of the adults.

Chapter Fourteen

“Pour us another round, would you? Excellent, thanks,” he said to the bartender, and got up to grab their drinks from the wizened old wizard who was running the hotel bar this afternoon. “Merlin’s beard, it’s good to meet you,” he said for the hundredth time. “It’s been a while since I heard someone speaking proper English!”

Sirius and Harry (who were going by John and Evan, those being the first names that had popped into their head when asked) smiled in reply. The serious-minded young red-head had turned out to be quite effusive over a couple of drinks. Sirius/John ran a hand through his nearly blond hair, which was hanging in his eyes just enough to remind him how light he’d made it. Harry/Evan’s fingers twitched on the table in his effort not to scratch his forehead, since after any number of concealment charms hadn’t worked, he’d had to resort to Muggle makeup to cover the scar on his head.

It had started out so innocently, with Harry being delighted to point out to Sirius (whom he really must remember to call John) that there was someone else in Egypt who had a ponytail like he did. And then the owner of the bright red length of hair had overheard him. Harry had been a bit nervous to see the man come tromping over in dragonskin boots and with a fang dangling from his ear, but Bill had been overjoyed to meet an Englishman in this country.

Their story was simple: John Rivers and his wife had a little boy, named him Evan, then his wife died and England ceased to feel like home. They’d been out of the country since Evan was a baby. Bill Weasley (Sirius had looked at him very sharply when he gave his last name) was curious as to whether or not Evan liked to move around all the time like that, but Evan assured him that he was quite content. He was steadily becoming a great fan of Bill Weasley, who was really one of the most normal people he’d ever met, despite his line of work. Curse breaker was such a cool job.

“So, how’s your education coming along?” Bill asked him politely while sipping his drink.

“All right,” he answered cautiously, licking a bit of foam off his upper lip. Bill had been a little surprised that his new friend John was letting his pre-teen son order a beer, but young Evan was so unconcerned about it that Bill was starting to wonder if maybe they shouldn’t let all kids start drinking that young so they could learn how to do it while under supervision. “I mean, good, mostly. I’ve gotten pretty far behind in a couple of things, but I’ve got a good background in Muggle subjects now.”

“We’re here on holiday while we decide on a good school for Evan to get up to snuff,” Sirius explained.

“You’re English, lads,” Bill said, sounding surprised. “What about Hogwarts? Surely you went there yourself, Mr. Rivers?”

“I did,” Sirius said gravely. “It’s one we’re considering, of course. But we’ve had such a fascinating life, it would almost be a shame to stop traveling around and learning about new cultures and so forth. We’ve both gotten a very healthy respect for the variety of wizards—and Muggles—in the world. Don’t want to forget those lessons.”

Harry was amused by how swiftly Sirius came up with that load of waffle. The truth was, Hogwarts hadn’t even been on their minds, and they’d never expected to meet an Englishman who’d be interested in Harry’s education. It was potions, magical creatures, and simply other wizards that Harry wasn’t familiar with and needed to learn more about. Those could be found many other places than England and those places wouldn’t cause Sirius to be thrown into jail and Harry to be shunted back into the Dursley’s house. But with England being so much at the forefront of the conversation, it was only natural for Sirius to start asking questions.

“So tell me, who’s Minister now?” he asked Bill, nursing his drink.

“That’s Cornelius Fudge,” Bill said promptly, and launched into a lengthy speech about the Minister’s high and low points. Sirius looked a bit bored, but Harry tried to pay attention. This was going to be important to him eventually, he had a feeling, and he needed to start figuring out the government there. “Course, he’s not listening to

Dumbledore at all about You-Know-Who, so that's a strike against him—"

"You-Know-Who?" Sirius asked quizzically. "I'm afraid I don't know who."

Bill grimaced, and lowered his voice. Harry found it quite laughable, but he was afraid he knew to whom Bill was referring.

"Surely you were there, John, when he was in power and terrorising—"

"Oh, Voldemort," Sirius clarified, but with a frown.

Bill wiped sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, letting out a nervous laugh. "Yes, him. You're the only Englishman I've ever met who'll say his name, except Dumbledore."

"Didn't know I wasn't supposed to," Sirius said with a shrug. "What was that you were saying, about the Minister Fudge not listening to Dumbledore . . .?"

"Oh, well," Bill said, and his face grew solemn. Paler, too. "I guess . . . he's back."

Sirius didn't want to show his shock, but his hand trembled on his glass a bit and his nostrils flared out as he took in a deep breath. "Back?" he muttered.

Harry was not surprised. Not really. Hadn't they been expecting this to happen someday? Why shouldn't it be now?

"My own brothers saw him."

"Your brothers? Didn't you say you have several?" Harry asked when Sirius seemed to be a long time recovering.

"Oh, yeah. This was the twins. They nearly got themselves killed, just a few months ago. One of the professors at Hogwarts, Quirrell

this was, got caught up in it when he went on holiday or something, got confronted by . . .”

Bill told them the whole story, at least as he understood it by piecing together what he'd heard from his family and what he'd read in the paper. Sirius and Harry sat in rapt fascination throughout the tale, only grimacing a bit when Bill got to the part in which Quirrell was eaten by a dog. The twins seemed to have come out of it all right, none the worse for the wear except a little more committed to their Defense Against the Dark Arts classes. “And of course they found out they hadn't been alone, which helped. The whole thing might have caused them to distrust adults altogether if it weren't for the fact that Professor Snape had been onto Quirrell and showed up to stop him only minutes after the twins did. They might not trust Dumbledore, but they trust Professor Snape.”

“Snape?” Sirius asked, sounding merely polite. Bill didn't know Sirius like Harry did, or he'd realize that the man was actually on the verge of a very angry outburst. His face was pinched and he was grabbing something under the table with all his might.

“Mmm, yeah,” Bill answered without concern, finishing off his drink. “I guess he had a touchy history, but he's supposed to be on our side now.”

Harry remembered that name. The poor bastard that his dad and godfather had tormented so much in school, the one who'd gone over to Voldemort. Well, maybe he'd seen the light, or maybe he just wanted to be on the winning team. It was something he'd figure out if he was every face-to-face with the man, but he wasn't particularly worried about it yet.

“Well, I've got to get back to work,” Bill said regretfully. “How long are you in town?”

“Not long,” Sirius said cautiously. “Probably only a day or two.”

“Ah, that's too bad,” Bill said, his face falling. “Well, come back through here and we'll have a toast to send you on your way!”

“If we can,” Sirius answered with a smile. “Thanks very much.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Harry added, thrusting out his hand to shake.

“Yeah, you as well. Good luck with your education, if I don’t see you, Evan.”

“Thanks, Bill.”

“You know somebody named Weasley, don’t you?” Harry asked Sirius as they walked through a colourful bazaar.

Sirius chuckled. “I know him,” he answered. “His parents were in the Order of the Phoenix, you know how I was telling you about that. Bill was only about nine or ten, last time I saw him. You know, I think Molly was pregnant when your mother was, Bill must have a brother or sister just your age. Not those twins, though, I think they were already born . . .”

“He didn’t recognize you,” Harry pointed out.

“No,” Sirius said, sounding quite pleased about it. “I don’t look too much like I did back then. Filled out some and gotten a few lines around the eyes, you know. And the last time he saw me would have been a picture in the paper when I escaped Azkaban, and I certainly wasn’t looking my best, there.” (True enough, Harry remembered how he’d looked then.) He glanced down at Harry with a wry smile. “And then there’s you. Cover up that scar, and you’re free as a bird.”

Obviously feeling good about their disguise, minimal though it was, he ruffled Harry’s hair affectionately, creating a worse mess than it was usually in. Harry scowled at him. He didn’t know why people were always doing that.

But Bill having a sibling his age, that was interesting to think about. He liked Bill, and it sounded like he came from a good family. A sibling of his could be a close ally. Maybe even a friend—but that was

a strange idea. He'd never really had any friends. People he talked to at school and stuff, of course. But the closest he'd ever been to having real friends was in Wyoming, and those weren't boys you wanted to talk to about serious stuff, anyway. There was Miguel and Catalina, of course, but they were so much older than him . . . and he needed to stop thinking about them.

He glanced up at Sirius. They'd left Brazil only a week ago, and he was thinking about Catalina nearly all the time. Harry could tell quite easily when he was. Sirius just looked sad and distant all the time. It hurt Harry terribly. He'd told Sirius that it would only be a few years before he was ready to strike out on his own, and it was okay to stay. He wouldn't have minded staying there with Sirius for a few more years. But Sirius had been right, of course. Catalina wasn't a witch, and someday, that would make a difference. He'd told her that he was a wizard, and she'd been prepared to accept that even if she didn't really understand . . . but someday, she'd get hurt by it. Which was, of course, Harry's fault, Harry knew that. It was association with him that would put her in harm's way. And he felt completely wretched that Sirius had chosen him over the woman he loved enough to marry. He didn't think his godfather had realized Harry's guilt yet, he was too miserable himself. Harry hoped he'd get himself under control and rein in his feelings before Sirius took notice. He didn't want to make Sirius feel worse.

"It's a good thing we got on the move when we did," Sirius said thoughtfully, his hands running over a beautiful piece of cloth at a stall he'd wandered over to, looking eerily similar to one of Catalina's favourite skirts. Well, if Harry hadn't already known he was thinking about her . . .

"What do you mean?"

"You need proper training," Sirius said grimly. "Now."

"Then you believe Bill? About Voldemort?"

"Of course. His family is well connected to Dumbledore, and that man has always been a step ahead of the rest of us as far as

Voldemort is concerned.” He chuckled. “You-Know-Who.” He shook his head in disbelief. “That’s what I get for not keeping up with the news.”

The man running the stall was expounding on the qualities of the cloth in Sirius’ hands, but neither of them were listening.

Harry shrugged. “I thought it was probably true. We were expecting it, though, weren’t we? That he’d come back?”

“Expecting? No. But I’m certainly not shocked. From what Bill was saying, most people refuse to believe anything of the kind. I’m not sure I blame them for being in denial. It was a terrible time, when he was in power.” He handed money over to the stall owner, but turned to give Harry a dark look. “He came after you then. He may do so again.”

“How can he, if I’m not there? How will he find me?”

“He’s a resourceful wizard. Best not to take our current anonymity too lightly. As I said, you need proper training, while you have the chance to get it.” He stared off into the far end of the bazaar, a frown on his face. “Got moving just in time,” he muttered.

Harry nodded. “Where are we going to go?” he asked, as they began to stroll down the row of stalls again.

“No idea,” Sirius said, almost smiling. “But we never have planned too far ahead, have we?”

“I guess not,” Harry said, also smiling tentatively.

Sirius looked down at his own hands and blinked. “Why did I buy this?”

Harry burst out laughing. “I don’t know, Sirius, I think it would make a very fine set of dress robes.”

Sirius laughed, too, and grabbed both ends to make a loop, which he used to lasso Harry and trap his arms at his sides. "You scoundrel! You just stood there while I bought this?"

Harry shrugged, laughing his head off. "I thought you must want it for something."

"You knew well and good I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing."

"Don't worry," Harry said, gasping for air. "It was cheap." Then he straightened up, very suddenly serious. "Hey," he said. "It's my twelfth birthday in two days."

"Yes, I know," Sirius said, sounding suspicious.

"You said I could pick out my gift, didn't you?"

"I said within reason," Sirius called out as Harry dashed forward, and then sighed deeply as he saw where his charge was headed. "No!" he called out. Harry grinned and started asking questions from the man leaning against the post of the stall. "No!" Harry pointed to him to be sure the man understood who had the money, here. "No, no, no!"

Then Harry held out his arm, and the little monkey with the smashed-looking face scrambled over his arm and perched on his shoulder the way he'd been perching on the stall owner's. Harry controlled the impulse to giggle at the way the monkey's smelly fur tickled his neck, and stood still to let it smell his hair and compare it to his previous owner.

"I will not," Sirius said as he approached, shaking his head and frowning. "I refuse to buy you that thing for your birthday."

The monkey chattered angrily at Sirius and grabbed hold of Harry's shirt tightly, prepared to defend itself against the threat. It got too agitated and fell right off Harry's shoulder. Harry's hands flashed out

and caught it, and the little creature scolded him ferociously, upside down in his grip.

“I’m going to call it Dudley,” Harry said with a grin.

Chapter Fifteen

Neville stepped into Flourish & Blotts just at Gran's heels. Going home for the summer was good for him, he thought. He might be all kinds of things at school, including disappointing semi-hero and the other Boy Who Lived, but with Gran, he was just Neville. The slightly bumbling but beloved grandchild who could very well walk behind her. He had sighed with real relief when he got off the train, ready to be nobody important for a few months, and the relief had carried him through the summer. The only person who came to call was Dumbledore, and he'd gotten used to him, all right. Great Uncle Algie, in particular, had been good for him. He was going quite deaf and simply shouted, "How's the incredible bouncing boy?" everytime he saw him.

Wow. There did seem to be a jolly great crowd at the bookstore today. Neville sighed and steeled himself. He just wanted his schoolbooks, not a scene. There was sure to be a load of people who wanted to say hello to him (or sneer at him) and shake his hand (or spit on him). There always were, and between greeting "fans" with a smile and dodging the glares of the less enthusiastic, it was truly exhausting.

He didn't understand them, any of them. All they knew was that he survived. He wasn't the one to defeat You-Know-Who, that was the Potter boy. All he'd done is lived. He was no hero, not really. He'd saved his classmate from a troll, except that she'd done the hard work. He hadn't been the one to rescue the Philosopher's Stone, either. He supposed Dumbledore had been expecting him to, but he'd been so overwhelmed by his classes that he hadn't even noticed the situation brewing. Dumbledore had told him all about his hopes for Neville, and Neville desperately wanted to be good enough for all of it. The trouble was, he wasn't sure he could be. The rest of the world didn't know the half of it, they just saw Dumbledore mentoring him and the Ministry holding his hand and knew there was something special. And now that he was at school, with all the chances to do something great, he was finding out that he couldn't live up to their expectations.

He didn't want it. He might wish he was good enough for it, but as he looked at the crowd he would have to face today, he knew he didn't

want any of it anymore. If he ever had, and he couldn't remember a moment where he'd been thrilled by the knowledge of what he was supposed to be.

"Oh, no . . ." Gran groaned as they entered, and Neville turned his eyes in the direction she was looking. Rather than groan, he smiled. Nobody would be looking at him today. "Why did it have to be Gilderoy Lockhart, of all people?" she grumbled as she strode past the gaggle of starry-eyed women waiting for his autograph.

They got his schoolbooks as quickly as possible, Augusta anxious to get out and away from Lockhart, and Neville anxious not to be seen. His gran was horrified to see that the majority of his books were written by Lockhart, but simply pressed her mouth into a thin line and handed them over at the counter.

The old wizard they paid for the books politely asked Neville if he was excited about having Lockhart as his professor this year, and Neville replied, slightly stunned, that he hadn't known. The old wizard advised him to go get his books autographed and introduce himself before the school year started. Neville stammered that he would do that, while his grandmother muttered under her breath. As soon as his books were purchased, Gran tugged him toward the exit with more mutterings and gripings about what a useless human being Lockhart was and how lucky Neville ought to be that Dumbledore had taught him so much because he wouldn't be learning a thing from Gilderoy.

"Longbottom," he heard someone say as they were exiting, and he nearly screamed. He'd almost made it . . .

"Oh. Hello, Draco."

The highly polished man behind his classmate must be Draco's father, then. He and Gran glared daggers at each other, while Neville and Draco deliberately struck up some minor pleasant small talk for a moment. Draco had been almost brutal about it on the train: it pleased his father to believe the two boys were friends of some sort, and he was anxious to keep his father happy and off his back. Neville

was agreeable to keeping up that appearance so long as Draco promised to stop picking on his classmates. He hadn't quite managed to negotiate an agreement from Draco that he'd stop all that pureblood nonsense around him, but he had procured a promise to stop referring to people as Mudbloods in Neville's presence. In return, Lucius Malfoy would be able to think they were friends, and Draco wouldn't be walking on eggshells at home. Draco had seemed mildly impressed at Neville's candor and negotiation skills during the conversation.

"Had a good summer?" Neville asked him, hoping he didn't sound as stiff as he felt.

"Brilliant," Draco drawled, sounding boastful. "I had to go to the sea for a holiday with Mother—" here he rolled his eyes "—but I also accompanied Father on a trip to Germany for a bit of business, and that was excellent. What did you do?"

"Nothing, really," Neville shrugged, and he looked up at Lucius Malfoy, trying to picture what business would take him to Germany. After the incident last year with the Weasley boys and Professor Quirrell, there had been raids from the Ministry and Neville wondered if Malfoy went abroad to dump suspicious possessions. "Hardly even saw anybody," he said, returning his attention to Draco. "Which was brilliant," he muttered under his breath. But Draco heard him, even if the adults didn't, and rather than sneer and poke fun, he raised his eyebrows and looked very slightly surprised.

"Well, I'll see you at school, then," Draco said, affecting a cheerful tone. "We've got to be going."

"Yeah, us, too," Neville said with relief, but frowned when he saw a cruel smile slide over Draco's face.

"Afternoon, there, Weasley."

Caught by the greeting, Ron had no choice but to at least look over, it was no good pretending he hadn't heard. He did have the presence of mind to pretend he thought it had been Neville greeting him,

though. He nodded at Neville without smiling while Draco's father and Ron's father were forced to exchange salutations to avoid looking uncouth. Neville almost laughed. Gran had declared herself too old to worry about that kind of thing, hence not a word spoken between her and Lucius Malfoy.

"Good holiday?" Ron muttered dully.

"Good enough," Neville said indifferently. He and Ron didn't get along, not with the way Ron sulked about and picked fun at people to make himself look better, but he supposed even he was better to talk to than Draco, in Ron's eyes.

"Come on," piped the high tones of what could only be a girl. Neville spun to see a petite girl of flaming red hair approaching. She was looking at Ron, though she nodded towards her father to indicate him as well. "We're all ready to go, Ron, quit dawdling."

"Female Weasels," Draco said in a quiet, delighted voice. Neville knew the other boy was imagining all the horrible things he might say on that subject.

There was only one thing to do, if he wanted to avoid hearing any number of nasty remarks, and that was to claim the girl as a friend and include her immediately in the small circle he'd negotiated protected status for.

"Hello, you must be Ron's sister," he said with a tentative smile.

She spun to look at him, and he was struck by what a bundle of energy she was. Snapping brown eyes, restless demeanour . . . she was like her older brothers, the twins. She didn't smile in return.

"Yes, I'm Ginny. You're Neville Longbottom, aren't you? I'm going to be at school with you this year, in Gryffindor of course, so I should tell you now that I think Harry Potter is still alive and he's ten times better than you. Just so it's out of the way."

Neville's face was burning, and he knew it was bright red. He really wished he didn't flush so much when he was embarrassed, but there was little he could do about it. Just so it's out of the way, indeed. He thought he might even appreciate her forthrightness, and it wasn't as though he wasn't accustomed to being spoken to like that. It came with being the other Boy Who Lived.

Draco was choking on laughter, the three adults were staring at Ginny like she was a new species that had popped up out of the floorboards, and Ron was scowling at his little sister.

"You're not still on about how he and Sirius Black are sitting on a beach sipping drinks out of coconuts, are you?"

"I never said that," she answered shrilly, turning on her brother with her arms around a cauldron full of books and unable to punch him. "I just think that Black had a change of heart and wanted to make it up to the people he betrayed."

Now almost everyone was chuckling a little bit, save Ginny and Neville himself. Then a long-fingered, pale hand reached into the cauldron she held and plucked out a large book. Lucius Malfoy flipped through a few pages of it with distaste on his face, and turned to Mr. Weasley.

"With an imagination like that, I suppose she can easily pretend these ratty things are new, hmm?" There was a devilish smile on his face. "I thought the Ministry would at least pay you overtime for all those extra raids, but obviously not . . ." He dropped the book back into the cauldron. "What's the use of being a disgrace to the name of wizard if they don't even pay you well—"

Ginny and her cauldron of books, as well as Neville as his armload, were knocked aside in a pile of tangled limbs and glossy jackets with Gilderoy Lockhart's photograph. Arthur Weasley had attacked Lucius Malfoy, and Ron was shouting "Get 'im, Dad!" and the older boys were running over to see what the fuss was about, and all was confusion for a moment. Then it was over as suddenly as it started, with Mr. Weasley was apologizing to his children stiffly for losing his

temper in front of them. Neville tried to sort out his books from Ginny's with a groan, knowing that he was going to have an awful time trying to keep Draco and Ron away from each other at school this year.

"Is this yours?" he asked, holding up a little black book he didn't recognize.

"No," Ginny said, shaking her head. Her face was red and her eyes were wet, but Neville thought she was the sort of girl who'd vehemently deny crying even if she was, so he didn't say anything. He wanted to offer her a handkerchief, but he didn't think she'd take it. Instead, he just helped her stack her books neatly back into her cauldron without meeting her eyes, giving her time to compose herself.

"Thanks," she said stiffly and she trotted off to exit with her family.

Neville smiled and picked his books up again. He frowned briefly over the little black book that looked like a diary, but shrugged and put it on top of the stack. Gran must have gotten it for some reason.

Ginny made it clear as soon as she got to school what kind of person she was. She accepted her brother Percy's pompous greeting into Gryffindor house but hardly smiled, gave Ron nothing more than a slightly affectionate shove as she walked by him, then seated herself by the twins to talk to them for a few minutes before she went back to the other first years. It was obvious which brothers she preferred, and they happened to be the ones the rest of the school preferred as well.

Not that the twins were quite as easy-going as they'd seemed last year, Neville thought as he watched them. They joked around just as much as before, but there seemed to be a small distance between them and their old friends. They had seen a man die by violence. They'd been dealt violence in their own school, by a man whom they were supposed to be able to trust. It could change a person, Neville guessed. They might be wary that anyone could behave like that. But they were still arguing loudly and cheerfully about how badly they were going to trounce Slytherin during the Quidditch season, and

asking their friend Lee Jordan what had happened to his spider, so they were all right.

Neville sat through the feast with hardly a word spoken to anyone. This was normal for him. There had been tentative greetings with Dean and Seamus, of course. He did talk to Hermione for a few minutes, but theirs was not a close friendship despite the mutual feelings of gratitude after the troll incident last October. It didn't take up much time out of his evening to exchange those few words. Neville was used to being quiet and watching other people talk. He learned many interesting things that way. He just needed to learn to listen to the right people, he thought, if he was ever to become a grand hero or whatever it was Dumbledore wanted. Listening to the right people could have led to him uncovering Quirrell's plot, but instead he'd been struggling to keep up with his classes.

When he went up to the dormitory that night, well ahead of the other three boys in his room, he took advantage of the silence to begin his diary. He'd never quite figured out the purpose of the little black book, but, concluding that it seemed to be a diary, had decided to make it his own. He thought he might record his thoughts and impressions of his teachers and classmates, so he could go back over it later and maybe work out when plots from You-Know-Who were infiltrating his school.

But when he sat down to write about Fred and George Weasley, that wasn't what flowed from his pen.

It's the first night back, and I already feel more lost than ever. I never know what to say to the others, but I've realized how much I hate being lonely. I wish I didn't know what I was. I wish Professor Dumbledore had just left me alone. It's so easy for the rest of them, even Ginny Weasley is already more comfortable in Gryffindor and it's only her first day here. I just wish I knew how to have friends.

He paused there for a moment, and read back over what he'd written.

Yuck, he wrote, dipping his pen for more ink. I didn't know I whined so much. I suppose I need to stop feeling sorry for myself. If I'm going

to do what I'm destined for, as Dumbledore says, I have to make the best of it.

"Morning, Neville," the red-haired girl sang out cheerfully as she sat at the table opposite from him and began snatching at the dishes of toast and eggs. Her friends were settling down around her like a little flock of birds, twittering and chirping with the energy of early morning.

"'Lo," Neville answered Ginny through a mouthful of bacon.

She was a strange girl, he thought to himself. After their awkward beginning and her candid statement that she preferred a dead hero to him, she had begun to treat him with perfect cordiality. Of course, she could afford it. She was a fairly popular kid, at least in her year, and nobody would mind if she deigned to notice Neville Longbottom once in a while. She was a lot nicer than Ron and just as much fun as the twins, in her own way, so being a Weasley was working to her advantage no matter what Draco Malfoy might think of and say about the family. She was an enthusiastic supporter of the Quidditch team and a decent student, too. She always greeted him when she saw him, even if she didn't strike up long conversations.

"You look tired," she said with a frown.

He grunted in response.

"Were you up late or something?"

He shrugged listlessly. For some reason, he couldn't remember what he'd been doing that would make him so sleepy. He'd started making an entry in his diary last night, and he thought he'd fallen asleep at his desk. He'd woken up in his own bed this morning, but the diary was in his hand still, and he thought he must have woken up just enough to get to bed. He didn't know what could have made him so tired.

Still, Ginny's pleasant attitude toward him merited an entry, and he never had finished the one he'd started last night. He opened the little black book he'd taken to keeping in his bookbag and started writing.

“You’re always writing in that thing,” Ron said, nodding at him.

Neville hardly looked up. “I guess so. I just like keeping track of things. Helps me think.” He didn’t mention that he always seemed to feel more confused when he was writing, lately, not more clear.

“Are you all right, Neville?” Hermione asked, breaking his focus and making him look up with a frown.

“Fine, if I could just finish a thought,” he said snappishly.

Hermione gave him a hurt, hard look. “Sorry, I was just a little worried about you.”

Just because I made Malfoy stop calling her a Mudblood, she thinks we’re such great friends now, he wrote spitefully in his diary. I’m just trying to do the right thing, that’s all. She’s nice enough, but she’s a frightful bore.

Then he frowned at what he’d written and crossed it out viciously. He didn’t really think that about Hermione at all. He liked Hermione. What on earth was making him behave like such a prat this morning?

“I’m fine,” he said, mustering up a genuine smile for his classmate. “Just tired. Classes this year are getting to me, you know.”

He shot a glare up at the ineffectual Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher when he said that. Lockhart was just as bad as Gran had told him.

“Let me know if you need help studying,” Hermione said, smiling back at him.

Neville sighed and returned his attention to the diary.

Chapter Sixteen

Something was wrong. He felt it deeply, instinctively. He didn't know what it was, but he knew that within the walls of the castle, a threat had appeared. The only indicator was that Hagrid had mentioned something from the Forbidden Forest killing some chickens, but that was enough. He'd relied on his instincts too often to start doubting them now, and so he rose from his desk and went down the spiral stairs and into his beloved school.

He loved every part of it, and he ran his hand in a caress over the stone of a staircase he began to climb. Even though his knees were old and achy and hated the stairs, and even though without his glasses he couldn't see the highest portraits on the walls anymore, he loved it. Every carpet, every spare bit of parchment, every creaky hinge . . . he'd been here so long that he felt when something had struck at the walls, and he could feel it now.

The students, the light of his life . . . as he passed by them, he received so many different attitudes. Some looked at him with an almost reverence or awe, something he surely did not deserve, and some with disgust or annoyance, which he didn't think he deserved either. There were a few that didn't look at him at all and didn't seem to notice his passage. That was more like it. Teenagers could be so very oblivious to anything that wasn't in their immediate sphere, and crusty old men they only saw at the dinner table didn't exactly fall into that category. But still, he loved them all. Every glance revealed some pain or passion, every face showed some studious concentration or lovesick longing or bitter loneliness. All the students were his children, in a way. Some more than others, he conceded. Some more than others.

The crows of students began to get thicker, and he started to really worry. Then a familiar head with a tight black bun was bobbing through the corridor, the woman nearly pushing students over to get to him.

"You must come, now," she said urgently, reaching him and grasping his arm.

Alarmed, he fought with her through the press of children to the front of the crowd. He stopped, stunned.

“The Chamber of . . . oh, no,” he murmured, too softly to be heard.

The ominous words dripped down from the walls in slowly running red rivulets, beside the body of the most disagreeable cat Albus had ever had the misfortune to come across. The puddle of water on the floor made gentle lapping motions at his shoes, and the students looked frightened and aghast, but first things first. He had to stop Argus killing somebody.

“Argus!” he called out, halting the man’s tirade. The caretaker moved aside to reveal that he had been shrieking at none other than the Weasley twins. Albus was not particularly surprised, after the amount of grief the boys had given him, and their propensity to be where they should not. It was their misfortune to be caught here, now, but he did not believe for a moment that they were the responsible parties.

Still, he took them away with Argus (to Lockhart’s offered office, drat that silly man), along with Minerva for support, and subjected the body of Mrs. Norris the cat to his inspection, after which he was able to pronounce that the cat was not dead but Petrified. Gilderoy prattled on about knowing everything about it, but they ignored him, just as always. The Weasley twins were sent on their way after it was ascertained that they did not know what had happened to the cat (one twin, he wasn’t sure which, said succinctly that they hadn’t the foggiest how to Petrify wood, much less a cat). He was able to assure Argus that steps could be taken to restore his precious pet, and Minerva was sent to round up the students and make sure they all reached their beds safely. Lockhart followed the body of the Petrified cat to wherever Argus seemed to think best (probably the dungeons), still going on about the elixirs he could make. Albus sighed with relief as they all left.

“I don’t know what to do,” he whispered to the finally empty room. “I have rarely been more certain of anything than I am of the fact that Tom Riddle was the source of the problem, the first time. And so it

must be him again. How could he be here now? How is that possible?"

He did not like stating so plainly that he was confused and unable to take action. But the world was full of things he disliked, and so he stated it anyway, just to have the facts straight. What action was there to take? Surely, surely, if a student saw something unusual, they'd come to him, or at least one of the professors. Wouldn't they?

Neville, if ever you learned anything from me, use it now, dear boy . . .

"Hey, Neville."

"Hey, Hermione," he replied glumly.

He expected her to pass by him and go on up to her room and leave him sitting in the common room alone. She had her friends waiting for her, after all, if only a few of them. He had no friends, only his diary, which he'd been writing in constantly since the incident with Mrs. Norris and especially since this morning when they'd gotten Very Bad News.

But Hermione didn't leave. She stopped beside him and tilted her head to the side, letting her frizzy hair spill over one shoulder.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I'm just tired," he said quietly. It was true, he was always tired lately, losing weight and developing deep circles under his eyes. This diary was taking something out of him, something vital. He knew it.

She glanced around to be sure no one was nearby, then sat down on the floor by his feet. "It's what happened to Colin Creevey, isn't it?"

Instantly, his eyes were flooded with tears, and he turned his face away in embarrassment. If it weren't for his exhaustion, he wouldn't be crying like this. He hated to cry, never wanted to do it in front of anyone, much less in the middle of the Gryffindor common room with

a girl watching. He wasn't even sure of the real reason for his tears. He was lost and frightened, yes, and it was because of what happened to Colin, but not in the way she meant. Maybe . . .

"I'm so confused," he started to explain, without ever meaning to. The words just spilled out of his mouth, and he was as amazed and mesmerized by what came out as Hermione was. "Something's wrong with me. I've been sleepwalking, or something. I can't . . . I can't always remember where I've been or what I've been doing."

He started to cry harder, and he curled up in the chair miserably. "All I ever feel like doing anymore is writing in this stupid diary. I think I'm hallucinating, I've started expecting the diary to write back. I believe it really is talking to me. I'm sure it's enchanted or something."

Hermione looked truly frightened. "Neville, you've got to tell one of the professors, then. They could help you."

"It's not just that," he managed to squeeze out. "I think I killed the roosters."

"What?"

"Hagrid's been talking about some of his chickens being dead, and I think I killed them. I've woken up a couple of mornings, and I had feathers in my clothes and blood under my fingernails. I think . . ." he took a deep, shuddering breath, "maybe I did something to Mrs. Norris. I'm not sure. I think I was there." He huddled over and cried with a breaking heart. "And maybe even Colin. There's something wrong with my brain, I feel like I know what happened to Colin but I can't remember."

He hated himself. He was a failure, not a hero. He was the one who needed rescuing. And here he was pouring his heart out to a girl he didn't even know very well. He was living in constant anxiety and fear, just like the rest of the students, but it was more than that and he didn't think she'd understand. But she was there and listening, and that was all he really needed. "I need to tell Dumbledore, I know I do, but I've been so afraid. He keeps asking me, and I keep saying I'm

fine. I'm not even sure what to say. It's all so muddled in my head!" he finished with a burst.

Hermione took his arm and drew him up out of the chair. "Come on, then."

"Where are we going?" he asked, complacently following her, emotions spent in confessing his troubles with none left to worry about where she was taking him.

"To see Dumbledore, of course. He'll take care of it."

"I know he will." Neville frowned. "I always knew he would, but I just couldn't go to him for some reason, like the diary didn't want me to. Strange . . ."

"Yeah," Hermione agreed, her voice oddly high. "Strange."

Albus steepled his fingers and stared down at the little black book. Neville, his fears brought to light and the diary out of his possession, was reverting back to himself very quickly. A few quick tests had proved to Albus that this was not just any silly enchanted diary. This was serious. This was Tom Riddle's diary, and it had to be destroyed. The way it had possessed Neville was simply . . . wrong. No diary should be that powerful.

And now the Chamber was opened, whether there was any one there to control what lay within or not. Reading through Neville's memories (he'd had to ask Severus to access them, as they were too muddled for his own skill with Legilimency) had revealed the basilisk quickly, but that was a problem as yet unresolved. There was a basilisk loose somewhere in the school, and it could take a month to find it. Who knew what havoc it could wreak by then?

It was the diary that weighed on him most heavily, however. Destroyed, but how? What might he release by doing so? It would require the most careful forethought and attention, and more than just the few hours' worth he'd given it so far. It would have to stay shut up

in this room, here with him in his office, where it couldn't hurt anyone, until he could find the solution.

And that was not a good thing, he didn't think. He didn't want it here. The temptation, the absolute desire, to write in Tom Riddle's diary and ask him questions, was a strong current pulsing through his thoughts and emotions. There were a million things he had to say to the boy who had come to style himself Lord Voldemort, and here was his opportunity to say them. He was quite sure he was stronger than a twelve-year-old boy, he had few doubts he could resist the diary's possessive qualities—but even a few doubts was too many. He was too powerful a wizard to risk it. And there was no real reason for him to do so, the young Tom Riddle would not know . . .

“ Well, Dumbledore,” said a portrait on the wall, sounding immeasurably cranky. “Are you going to stop staring at the thing and destroy it so we can turn out the lights and get some sleep?”

With hands that did not tremble through sheer force of will, he set the diary in a cupboard and laid a strong enchantment on the door so that no one else could open it. He was beginning to think he knew what this was, and he was very unhappy with the idea.

Luckily, it was only the next day that all these issues were resolved. Neville Longbottom, who'd been told he could come to Dumbledore's office anytime he wished but never took advantage of it, appeared in his doorway and asked humbly if he could come in.

“Of course, my boy,” Albus said, waving his hand beckoningly. “Sit. What is it?”

Neville shrugged uncomfortably. “Have you killed the diary yet?”

Killed. Interesting word. Oddly fitting in this circumstance, as Albus was now certain of what he'd begun to suspect yesterday.

“Not yet,” he answered truthfully. He'd been thinking over the best way to do it just when Neville came in.

“Can I . . . watch? I think I’d feel better if I saw it was gone with my own eyes.”

Albus smiled, and understood what he meant. Perhaps he’d come to love the boy too much, or trust him more than he ought to, over the years. It was so rarely that a person made him smile like that. “You can, but I will need the basilisk before I am able to do so.” He did not tell Neville that he planned to harvest a great deal of the venom, or that he was sure this was just the beginning.

“Oh, right. That’s why I really came up here, actually. My mind’s all coming back now, and I remember where the Chamber is. It’s in the girl’s bathroom . . .”

In the end, it was easy. Severus was quickly able to extract the necessary phrase of Parseltongue (and if Albus had needed any more confirmation of what the diary was, here it was possessing Neville enough to give him the ability to speak Parseltongue!) so that they could access the Chamber of Secrets. He asked Fawkes to gouge out the basilisk’s eyes while he and Severus were descending the passage, so they would not have to worry about encountering its deadly stare.

Albus had counted on only a few quick spells being necessary, but he had not realized just how fast a basilisk moved. When his triumphantly cast spell missed the basilisk and hit the wall, sending a shower of stone shards around them, he ducked with his heart thumping. It was Severus who finished the beast off with his quick wits. He allowed the basilisk to begin a strike on him, and levitated a sharp piece of stone in front of himself, driving the fragment through its brain.

“Ha! Good work!” Albus said breathlessly, watching the animal in its death throes.

Severus straightened his robes with a grim look, his eyes on the basilisk. He sidestepped to avoid being hit with a thrashing coil. “Of course,” he murmured.

Albus was a bit disappointed by the lack of enthusiasm, but he'd take what he could get from Severus. The man had become more and more stoic and silent over the years, until Albus was almost surprised he was getting a response at all. That thing with Quirrell last year, although regrettable, had been good for Severus. Albus had arrived just too late, stayed just too far in the background, and it had made the professor come out looking like a hero, and that was just fine. Albus suspected that he might even be almost fond of the Weasley twins, whether he was able to admit it or not.

You'd never suspect him to be fond of anything, just by looking at him. He helped harvest the venom with a grim look and hardly a word. But he did help harvest it, and agreed with Albus when he took a complete fang that stabbing the diary was probably a good idea. Just for that, Albus allowed him to take a vial of the venom to do some experimenting on. He was quite a brilliant Potions master, after all, no reason to grudge him a bit of fun.

Then he hurried back to his office where Neville would be waiting for him by now, so that they could destroy the diary together. After it was done, and they were cleaning up the amazing amount of ink that had burst forth, they chatted for a while about Neville's classes. It appeared Gilderoy Lockhart was, if anything, even more useless than Albus had originally believed. He had to get a better teacher in that position, and he thought he knew who could do it. The class might actually learn something, and there were few people more deserving.

"Will Professor Lockhart be back next year?" Neville asked, in a tone that was obviously strained to its limits of polite inquiry to avoid sounding disapproving.

"No, I don't think so," Albus answered. "I have someone else in mind. Someone I . . . I owe it to."

After that, he would say no more. Wouldn't do to have Neville tell anyone about it before anything was decided.

Chapter Seventeen

“No, South Africa was a real joke,” Sirius told the spectator seated next to him. “His tutor knew less about Astronomy than he did, and I could have taught him Potions just as well. And I’m rubbish at Potions.”

“Cool country, though,” Harry added in an abstracted voice, peering through a pair of binoculars at the Quidditch pitch. There was plenty of activity down there, even if the game hadn’t started yet. He was fascinated by everything regarding Quidditch now. The town in South Africa they’d been living in had been all-magic, and he’d finally had the opportunity to learn how to fly on a broom. Sirius had been holding his breath to see how he’d do, and he was quite satisfied that Harry was nearly as amazing on a broom as his father. A little more experience, and he could be better. Hence the fascination with Quidditch—he’d discovered yet another thing he was good at.

“So you’ve come to Bulgaria to study Potions?” their curious fellow Quidditch fan asked.

“We’re not sure where we’ll end up,” Sirius said. “But when we caught wind of all this excitement over this new Quidditch player, we wanted to see the game.”

The red-head next to them grinned. “Not surprising. We came over from Romania for this.” Here he gestured to the two men sitting on his other side. They were all similarly thick and sturdy-looking, with well-muscled arms and chest, and a variety of burns and scars dotted their skin. “We work at the largest dragon colony in Europe,” he said proudly.

Harry turned from the binoculars at that. “Excellent,” he said, his eyes wide behind his glasses. His hair was the same light brown colour as Sirius’ now, and his scar was well-covered, but it still gave Sirius a moment of panic to see Lily’s eyes blazing out at him from James’ face. Here was yet another Englishman sitting by them who could recognize them. “I’ve got to see that someday,” he said, holding out his hand across Sirius to shake. “Evan Rivers.”

“Charlie Weasley,” he said, pumping Harry’s hand firmly.

Harry couldn’t help but laugh. “Weasley?” he confirmed.

Charlie’s amiable grin died. “Yeah. Something funny?”

“Nothing like that,” Sirius said. “We met your brother a year ago.”

“You did?”

“In Egypt. At the beginning of our African tour, before we settled in South Africa. We had a couple drinks with him at this hotel bar he likes to go to. Bill, right?”

Charlie relaxed, and his face split into a grin again. “Yeah, of course!” he said enthusiastically. “Bill wrote me and told me all about it! John and Evan, right?”

“Right.”

“Oh, wow,” he laughed. “Bill will die when I tell him I met you here! Funny world, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Sirius grunted in amusement at the delight Charlie seemed to take in the admittedly fortuitous circumstance. He, of course, didn’t know about the fun brothers could have with each other when it came to this sort of thing.

“Game’s about to start!” Harry crowed, plugging the binoculars back into place.

“So tell me about this game, why it’s got everyone in such a buzz,” Sirius said to Charlie calmly. The game likely wouldn’t start for at least another couple of minutes. Still, he smiled at Harry, glad something had him so excited. Harry was so even-tempered and introspective that seeing him with emotions on display was unusual. “I just figured it would make a cool birthday gift for him—he turned

thirteen yesterday—to be able to see a real game, I wasn't sure what it was all about.”

“It's this new player they're introducing,” Charlie explained. “It'll be his first professional game, it's his debut. He's only sixteen or seventeen. Name's Club or Crap or something. Oi, Steffen, what's this bloke's name?”

“No idea,” the man nearest him replied in a thick accent. “Vlad, you know?”

“His name is Krum,” the third dragon tamer replied, his accent nearly indecipherable. Apparently handling dragons didn't require a lot of speaking to each other, or they'd never get anything done, Sirius thought to himself.

“Krum, eh? He'll be one to watch though, that's what they're all saying,” Charlie said, and picked up his own pair of binoculars. “That's if you can get a good enough seat to see it,” he grumbled, and glued his eyes to the pitch as the game began.

Sirius found himself quite amazed by Krum's skill as the game progressed. He was given to making flashy moves, but they weren't all useless. Twice they distracted the Austrian Seeker from catching the Snitch when he was in a much more advantageous position than Krum. He overheard Charlie dissecting minute points of the game for the slightly bemused Steffen, who let him talk with a long-suffering that indicated he'd heard it all before.

“You must be a Quidditch player, yourself!” Sirius shouted over the roar of the crowd as one of the Bulgarian Chasers scored.

Charlie clapped his hands enthusiastically, but looked up at Sirius with a grin. “I played at Hogwarts!” he answered.

“You any good?” Harry called over to him.

Charlie shrugged, still smiling. “Fair, anyway,” he said, his voice getting quieter as the cheering died away and play picked up again.

There was a wistfulness to Harry's expression, and Sirius resolved himself to find them another completely magical settlement to live in, at least a place out in the country where Harry would be able to fly without too much trouble.

The celebration at the tavern was loud and raucous. The Bulgarian victory, which they'd been so sure of before the match, nevertheless seemed to come as a great surprise and relief, and young Viktor Krum's performance had been just as remarkable as promised. Consequently, the partying was momentous. Charlie, Steffen, and Vlad had only been able to have a few quick drinks before they'd had to leave to be able to get back to work the next day. Sirius and Harry, certainly not native Bulgarians or Austrians and therefore not rooting for one team over another, tried to avoid being forced to toast to an undefeated season for Bulgaria. They would have avoided the celebration altogether if possible, but the tavern was part of the inn they'd found accommodations in and they were too hungry to skip dinner and go straight to their room.

Sirius saw a man sitting by himself in a corner and looking grumpy. This spelled almost certain trouble, and he knew Harry would find himself obligated to break it up in the event any real fight broke out, so he went over to the man who was hunching over his drink and glowering at everybody. Harry elected to stay at the table and wait for their food.

"Mind if I join you?"

The man looked up. "You're English?" he grunted. "Not Bulgarian, then."

Sirius grinned and sat down, holding his own drink. One of the girls at the bar had seemed to find him immensely attractive, and he wasn't worried about his food finding its way to him here. But that made his stomach twist until he was hardly hungry anymore . . . the ache of missing Catalina was still there, even a year later.

"And you're Austrian. You picked the wrong bar, friend."

The man sighed helplessly. "I am staying here tonight. By the time I realize I am in the bad part of town, I am too late to move somewhere else. Everything is full tonight." He scowled down into his drink. "And we are defeated."

Sirius laughed and clapped a hand on the man's shoulder. "Don't take it too hard, that Seeker of theirs is pretty amazing, after all. Your team did well."

"They were terrible," the man growled, then unexpectedly smiled. "Thank you anyway. I am Sascha."

"John," Sirius replied, and they shook hands.

They started talking, and Sirius looked back over at Harry and saw with amusement that his godson had been joined by a pretty young girl. Best not to head back over there too quickly.

Harry sipped at a surprisingly good local brew and idly wondered who it was that Sirius was talking to. He was being left alone for a moment by the other patrons, thankfully enough, since the excitement was starting to wear him out. He just wanted to get some food and relax. At least the bar wasn't putting up a fuss about him being too young to drink. He'd run into that problem a couple of times in Africa, and it was silly. It wasn't like he couldn't just get a beer at home, instead. It was just nicer on tap. And sampling the world's beers was a fun pastime for a traveller, incomparably better than collecting post cards or some other rubbish like that. At least he wasn't getting into trouble like the other kids he'd met in his life.

A girl approached his table, and he tried not to stare at her. It was hard, given the length of her black dress, which was nearly nonexistent. She had flawless skin and her hair was a rippling brown brook down her back nearly to her waist. She flipped her hair casually to better display it, with a hand that ended in nails painted a deep blue colour. She had too much eye makeup on, and her heels made her legs look longer than was strictly natural but definitely left no room for complaint. She saw him watching her, and slid smoothly into

Sirius' vacant seat, revealing nothing despite the tiny skirt. She was practiced at this.

"Uh, hello," Harry said.

"Good evening," she said in a rough voice that said she smoked too much. Way too much, since she was no more than twenty years old.

"You, er, celebrating the win?"

"I'm working," she said without concern.

Ah. That answered a few questions.

"I see. Well, you shouldn't have any trouble with that, you're . . . you're very . . ." He looked into her guileless gaze, her smoky gray eyes directed on him. "Wow."

"You are not from here," she observed.

"No, just traveling through."

Her eyes were unwavering, and she slowly crossed her legs, allowing her raised calf to skim over his leg as she did. "You have money?"

"Well, er, yes."

Merlin, but he was being so stupid. He'd been making friends with prostitutes for nearly half his life as he trailed around behind Sirius. Not in the last year, not after Catalina, but he'd met his fair share. She shouldn't be affecting him this way. And he resolved that from here on out, he would retain his composure. He needed to get rid of her, but he didn't want to hurt her feelings.

"I'm sure I'm not the only one who does," he said pointedly. "There are lots of men here who look like they're in a generous mood. Older than me."

“How old are you?” she asked, her forehead furrowing in a frown. It was actually sort of adorable on her.

“Sixteen,” he lied without blinking. Oh, hell, why had he said that? That was stupid. Was this what being thirteen and hormonal did to you?

“They are not so good-looking as you,” she commented, as casually as if she were saying that today had been less cloudy than yesterday.

Or with pockets as deep, Harry thought sardonically. Someone who was paying for a meal and a room and tickets to the game obviously had some money. He had all the money Sirius had given him for his birthday, trusting that he knew better than his godfather what he really wanted this year. He’d been thinking of getting himself a broom, although he wanted to wait until they settled down somewhere to do it.

“Besides, I’m tired of this town,” she sighed, looking forlorn and in need of rescuing—she was really good. “I like foreigners much better.” In other words, the locals here would have her kicked out because they were tired of her.

“Listen, er, what’s your name?”

“Stephanie,” she answered, the name pronounced much differently than he’d heard it before. Her leg brushed over his again. “Did I hear that man over there say it was your birthday?”

“Yes,” he said weakly.

She smiled, and he stopped breathing for a moment. “Then you will get a special discount, of course.” One of her blue fingernails tickled as she ran it over the skin of his wrist.

“Oh, I see. Ah.”

She bubbled with musical laughter, and stood up with the same practice that she’d shown when sitting down. Her elegant fingers slid

through his hands, which were clamped onto his beer glass with desperation, and said, "Come on."

Harry followed her to the stairs without blinking once.

"I am a Squib, I should tell you," she said, her back to him as she led the way up.

"I don't care," Harry managed to say.

"Some people do," was her reply, her head not even turned in his direction. But when they reached the top of the stairs, she leaned against the wall in a casually provocative position, and he stopped.

"Well? Which is yours?" she asked when he didn't move, just looked at her.

"Oh, right," he said, blushing, and led her to the room he was sharing with Sirius. He held the door for her, and she laughed with delight. It even sounded genuine.

"You are a gentleman," she said, her eyes sparkling as if she'd discovered something truly exciting.

"Well . . . yes," he stammered. "So what?"

"Gentleman do not extend courtesy to girls like me."

"I do," he said firmly, and closed the door with a hand that was suddenly steady. He didn't like the pain he saw in her when she said that. She might not think he noticed, but he was a damn good Legilimens. He wouldn't invade her mind, of course, but he could read what was written on the surface easily enough. He had the presence of mind to lock the door so Sirius couldn't come in to check on him, then stood there and looked at her, feeling immensely awkward again. "So, what do I do?"

“You sit on the bed,” she said, her voice husky and amused. “I do the rest.”

He did as instructed, and she pressed her knees against the edge of the bed, angling her upper body over him. Her lips pressed along his neck in a trail, and he shuddered when he felt her tongue flicking against his ear. He reached out a hand to test the gorgeous breasts hovering in front of him, just to see what they felt like. He had no idea how she managed it, but when she pulled her head back, his pants were gone. He hadn't even noticed them being removed. Probably because it was the first time a beautiful woman had let him fondle her, he thought dazedly.

She ran her eyes over him, along his skinny adolescent frame. “You are not sixteen,” she said slowly.

“And your name isn't Stephanie,” he answered.

She looked at him with surprise for a moment, then she laughed in her bubbling, musical way again, and bent her head to her task.

The animated and potentially profitable conversation with the surly Austrian was interrupted by the cute young server who was carrying not only his food, but his godson's.

“Do you know where . . .?” she trailed off.

Sirius looked over at the table, which had been re-occupied quickly after Harry left it. He felt a stab of sudden, blinding panic, in which he was absolutely certain that Harry had been recognized and taken away, and that he'd be thrown back in Azkaban as soon as they could transport him there. He couldn't breathe.

Then he remembered the girl, which calmed him while at the same time annoying him. He'd thought it was funny for Harry to have a conversation with a pretty girl, not take her off somewhere for a kiss and possibly a grope. He was irrationally angry at Harry for giving him such a bad scare. But he knew he had to brush it off to maintain his cover, so he just chuckled and turned back to Sascha.

“You see what I mean about him? Unpredictable.”

Sascha just smiled (his first smile of the evening) and shifted in his chair, rearranging his chronically slumped shoulders. “I would not have it any other way, if I am to do this for you. It is the sign of a quick mind, to be that way. I could not teach Potions to a stupid boy.”

“He’s certainly not that,” Sirius said dryly. “Too smart for his own good, more like.”

Sascha’s eyes gleamed. “Like his father, perhaps?”

Sirius chuckled, taking the jibe with good humour, but reflecting that the man was more right than he knew.

“So, Sascha, where can you get a broom in this town?” Sirius asked. Harry was standing at the window of their new living room, looking out at the cobbled side street of the village they’d just relocated to.

“A broom?” Sascha asked quizzically, frowning. With his sloped shoulders and bad posture, he was a small-looking man, but he had quite a menacing frown. His hair was just beginning to be sprinkled with gray, but he didn’t seem particularly old, and one would be foolish to underestimate him.

“For Evan, he needs one,” Sirius explained, when Harry didn’t speak for himself. “Do you have a broom shop?”

“Unfortunately no,” Sascha answered. “We have a shop for broom repair, but to get a broom you must travel to the city. We are very isolated here, as you see.”

“Oh, all right,” Sirius said congenially. Served him right for not asking before they settled in to their new home. A trip to a larger city was in order, anyway, since they were extremely light travelers for the most part and would need furniture and clothing. Sirius was not particularly good at Transfiguration, so it was no good buying a matchbox and turning it into a bed. He could probably turn it into a

cigar case. He could probably turn the bird nesting in the eaves into a cigar case, too. But you couldn't really sleep on one of those, unfortunately.

He had high hopes that Harry would do better with Transfiguration, but it was Potions he was most concerned about. Harry wasn't even at a standard first-year level, and Sirius had forgotten so much that he was nearly as useless.

His Defense work more than made up for it, Sirius thought with pride when a cockroach scuttled out of a closet and Harry blasted it with his wand before he'd had a chance to properly identify the movement. If there was one thing Sirius was ever good at, it was Defense, and consequently Harry was far above the curve there. The sharp instincts were in large part due to Miguel, he had to admit. Miguel had him trained as a keen observer and quick reactor, and Sirius had given him the spells to back it up. It was nothing like enough to actually stand against Vol—well, better call him You-Know-Who to avoid attention, even if he hadn't gone in for that nonsense at the beginning—but it was good, anyway.

"Where did you learn that?" Sascha asked with interest. "You are young to be so well-practiced."

Harry pointed at Sirius casually, and resumed staring out the window. Sirius shook his head at the boy, knowing the cause. He really should have warned Harry away from girls for a few more years. He had the feeling he didn't know the whole story behind that girl in the tavern last week.

Sascha was looking positively delighted, ignoring Harry's brooding. "You must be very good, sir, to teach him so much."

"I told you, just call me John," he rebuked Harry's new Potions tutor.

"Yes, I have forgotten myself. I must tell the mayor. He will be so excited to meet you."

"Why?"

“We are very isolated, this town and people. We are a small community, with not many strong defenders. We have very bad vampire and werewolf problems. We have had two attacks this year. The mayor wants to hire a good man to do patrols and keep us safe. Do you have the skills for such a task?”

Sirius was on the one hand happy to have a job land in his lap like this, and not just manual labour this time. However, the job itself . . . he knew little about vampires except that what they did was creepy and that he was fairly sure he could handle them. Werewolves were a different story. But he did need the job. He hadn't liquidated enough of the family money before he left, and what he had, he needed to spend paying Sascha for Harry's training.

“Yes. I have experience there,” he said, and hated himself for the way it sounded.

Sascha clapped him on the back, shook his hand, gave him the keys to the little house, and departed with a promise to get an appointment with the mayor as soon as possible. Sirius smiled and shook his hand enthusiastically and tried to hold his emotions at bay until Sascha departed.

He joined Harry in staring out the window, his knuckles white on the sill. Leaving Catalina had left him with a gut-wrenching ache he tried to avoid thinking about. Knowing that Remus Lupin was still out there, that Remus believed Sirius had betrayed their best friends, was a much older wound that was less an ache than a hole straight through him.

Chapter Eighteen

A wisp of steam from the head of the train drifted past the window, catching his eye. He blinked, with effort. It was hard to force his eyes open again. Another full moon, come and gone, and he was exhausted. The steady rumble of the wheels on the tracks beneath him, just settling into the pace they would keep for the coming hours, were soothing in their own way, beckoning him toward sleep. It was more than mere exhaustion, though. It was the sense of overwhelming relief. The simple lack of worry that was almost impossible for him to grasp. The absence of fear that was nearly a physical presence in his life, riding on his shoulders and whispering in his ears, was allowing him to feel the weariness it normally kept at bay.

He had a job. A good job. One that he was confident he could do, among people he thought he could be confident with. For once in his life, he wasn't afraid he would lose the flat tomorrow or be going hungry this week. The world of academia was something he knew and understood, and this job gave him a sense of security that he had honestly never known. He didn't have to worry, this time, about his employer finding out about him, because his employer already knew and had taken steps to control the situation. He was nearly giddy with relief. The swirl of emotions passing through him was close to making him sick, it was so dizzying.

He looked out at the countryside passing by, and smiled. It was beautiful out here, the further you got away from the city. The coach he was sitting in was uncomfortably warm, after sitting in the sun for two hours for boarding students, but the rushing wind buffeting the window as they steadily made their way out of the city cooled the pane of glass. He leaned his forehead against it and let out a sigh at the delicious sensation of cold. Lesson plans for his classes, worries about whether or not his secret would be discovered by someone who shouldn't know, thoughts about the experiences in his life that had brought him to this point . . . after their mad circuitous route through his mind, they melted away at the touch of the glass on his brow.

He closed his eyes, escaping the blur of quickly shifting scenery. He did not open them again for a long time. Three young boys came into the coach and settled down, arguing over some fine point of a Quidditch rule, but he was already so deeply drowsy that it did not interest him in the slightest that he was no longer alone. He made note that the boys called each other Dean, Seamus, and Ron, and were discussing who on earth he might be, then let himself drift off to sleep.

It didn't last long.

"No, Crookshanks!"

The agonized feminine wail didn't so much rouse him as split his eardrums and force him to take note of the damage. His eyes shot open to find a scene of chaos. There was a large and amazingly fierce ginger-coloured . . . was it a cat? . . . fighting desperately with one of the boys in the coach while the two other boys hollered and tried to decide if they wanted their valuable skin exposed to the thing's claws. A young girl with quite a bounty of untamed brown hair was attempting to grab the animal by its middle and pull it away from the boy, who had one hand pressing against the cat's back and one hand waving desperately in the air. He focused on the waving hand as the relevant detail, since it was obviously what the cat wanted, and saw the boy was holding aloft a terrified rat.

He sighed with disappointment (he'd been enjoying that comforting sleep), and stood up to help. Every eye turned to him with surprise—well, except the cat, who appeared to be very single-minded. It gave the red-haired boy a vicious scratch on the arm, and he let it go with a howl of pain. When the cat darted up the poor boy's chest, he saw his moment and neatly grabbed the cat by the scruff of the neck, depositing it without ceremony into the arms of the astonished girl.

"This is yours, I believe?" he said quietly.

She nodded her head, then turned to the boy and said, tears in her eyes, "Oh, Ron, I'm awfully sorry! Crookshanks was just sitting by my feet, I didn't notice he'd gone missing, I went looking as soon as—"

“Just get that thing out of here, Granger” he said nastily, looking down at his bleeding arm with a scowl.

She whirled around and retreated, apparently mature enough to understand when an apology was too early.

“Let me see your arm.”

The red-haired boy recoiled a bit, looking up at him. “Who are you?”

“You may call me Professor Lupin,” he answered, trying to look non-threatening.

“Professor?” he asked suspiciously.

The tall black boy nudged the other boy. “Defense Against the Dark Arts,” he said with wide eyes.

“You mean Lockhart’s gone?” the third boy said in relief. That would be Seamus, then, he supposed, making the other boy Dean.

They all three looked up at him. Apparently he fit the bill better than their previous teacher, because then they were all nudging each other and grinning and saying things like “Brilliant.” He just took out his wand and quickly mended the deep scratches in Ron’s arm. Remus Lupin had rarely been referred to as “brilliant,” at least not in the last twelve years and he wasn’t sure what to do with the compliment.

“Any harm to your rat?” he murmured as he worked.

Ron inspected his pet. “Don’t think so, he . . . I think he’s actually asleep,” he snorted with amusement. He gave his new professor a sidelong glance that invited covert action. “Could we tell Hermione he was dying and you just barely managed to save him?”

He almost laughed, but repressed the urge. “Afraid not,” he said gravely. “I don’t think I ought to lie to students on my first day.”

Except that he'd started lying before he even boarded the train, if you wanted to get down to the details. He'd been lying as soon as he accepted the job. He'd implicitly stated he had the student's best interests at heart and would never jeopardize them. He did have their interests as top priority, but that didn't always mean he wouldn't do something to the contrary. That it wouldn't quite be his fault was a mere technicality. Potions were all well and good, and he didn't anticipate any problems, but accidents happened.

It was his most fervent wish that there would be no accidents this year. He pretended to go back to sleep to avoid talking to the boys, who'd wonder where he came from and how he got the job, but he just leaned against the window with his shabby traveling cloak drawn up and thought ahead to the coming year. He managed to keep from speaking until the train arrived.

He disembarked, saw the stark outline of the castle against the dusky sky, and was assaulted by his memories. He immediately hurried off, away from the students, tears smarting in his eyes. Damn it, he'd hoped he could at least hold himself together until he was in the privacy of his own room. But the strength of his memories of this place was too much. And the bitter taste those memories had acquired made it less than pleasant to have them rush through him like this. He made a beeline directly for the Great Hall and his place at the staff table, determined to remain stoic throughout the evening and not give in to tears like some frightened first-year girl.

He watched the Sorting dry-eyed, but it was an effort. He kept remembering the Sorting that had placed him with James Potter, Peter Pettigrew, and Sirius Black for the next seven years. It had been the most amazing thing in the world, at the time, to be in Gryffindor House and to develop friendships. Now . . . now he wished he'd never met them. Wished he'd been Sorted into Ravenclaw. Never made friends at all.

The price of those fantastic friendships was being abandoned, the only one left standing, knowing how the friendships that had meant everything in the world to him had been betrayed. Nothing was worth

that price. He had never allowed himself a friend since then. He couldn't go through that twice.

Besides, he thought, not for the first time, he hadn't gotten the opportunity to truly bring the last friendship to a conclusion yet. One day, he promised himself, he would get his hands on Sirius Black. Maybe they would talk about it, about why. But they wouldn't talk long. He wanted to face Sirius and get his revenge. He hoped they met on a full moon.

He wondered if any of the students who clapped at his introduction knew who he was. It wasn't often that someone really recognized his name, but those who did knew who he was, and he hated that. They would tread so carefully around him, as though the slightest misplaced word would cause him to shatter. Or they'd clap him on the back and ask him jovially if he still beat himself up for missing all the signs that Sirius was going to betray them all. It was all he could do at that point to say nothing and leave before he gave in to the wolf and just bit them. What signs? he always wished he could say. How was I to know? There was nothing. Nothing! He wished he could say, but he didn't say it. It was his own private pain to carry, and he did not share it. With whom could he safely fall apart? There was no one, anymore.

He caught Neville Longbottom watching him with a serious, steady look. Of course. That boy would know everything of his past. Dumbledore had probably told him every minor detail of the war, every part of the story that had led to Harry Potter's death and his place as the new boy hero. He didn't know what kind of boy all this had made Neville into, but it was obvious that he was very serious-minded. He didn't seem to fit in with his peers, although with his peers being Ron, Dean, and Seamus, that might be lucky. Still . . . he hadn't fit in with James and Sirius at the beginning, either. He'd been given something he didn't want, that made him mature too early, set him apart from the other students. Maybe he and Neville had something in common.

He was tired, so tired that all his muscles were quivering, but he didn't move. He had his teeth clamped on the dirty brown fur of the beast's neck, and he'd held it in place for the last half hour without

letting it move. Every time it tried to rise, he bit deeper and growled. He'd played games with the thing all night, barking, howling, chasing it and holding it at bay. There'd been an hour where he'd simply padded through the woods at its side, sniffing around at the many interesting scents to be found. But as dawn grew closer and closer, the creature had become more and more ferocious and determined to get into the quaint little wizarding village. He'd been forced to pin it to the ground and hold it there. They were both soaking wet from melted snow and being still for so long was making the cold unbearable. After a whole night of keeping this animal in check, he was already worn out, and he was close to the breaking point.

But while he was close to breaking, so was dawn. The sun smeared the gray sky with streaks of pink, and he felt a sudden loss beneath his teeth. The fur was melting away. He quickly opened his aching jaws and stepped back. The fierce, filthy beast in front of him leapt up with a snarl, but its matted hair was retracting, its claws were sinking into fingers, its snout was receding . . . the naked man started to run forward, stumbled, and fell with a hoarse, exhausted cry into the muddy slush they'd made of the snow on the ground.

He himself was already running away, darting into the trees. He wasn't looking peak himself, he noticed. His glossy black coat was just as dirty as the werewolf's, and he had a gash down his front leg that was crusty with dried blood, courtesy of the creature he'd contained. He hunched down behind a large tree trunk and transformed back into a human. He looked down at himself, chuckled, and pulled his wand out of the robes he'd transformed himself into.

"Scourgify," he murmured, removing the streaks of mud and blood on his skin. He left the ugly-looking gash on his arm unattended. He and Harry were practicing minor medical spells, so he wanted to save that until he got home. He tore a strip from his clothing and enlarged it, made it into another set of robes. Then he strode with purpose back to the fallen man, making sure to crunch his feet on dead branches on the ground to announce himself, but he kept his wand in his hand.

“Obliviate,” he murmured just as the pathetic figure on the ground tried to turn his head to see who was coming. It wouldn’t do for the man to remember anything about last night. Sirius worked this job for this town without any explanation of how he did it. He could not afford anyone to link a large black dog to John Rivers, not as his pet nor anything else. Werewolves weren’t likely to talk about their experiences, obviously, but he would not and could not take that chance. Peter Pettigrew was not dead, and if he ever caught wind of it, his returning master would be after them in a heartbeat. Not to mention that if Remus Lupin heard of it, the entire Ministry of Magic would be descending upon them as well.

He saw the man’s eyes go temporarily blank, and knew his spell had worked. He approached more closely.

“Good morning,” he said in German. He was enjoying living here. He was finally ahead of Harry with the local language, having learned German as a child. It was just lucky they hadn’t ended up in a town that spoke more Hungarian or Slovenian, as Harry would probably be showing him up as usual.

The man on the ground gave him a frightened look and said nothing.

“You didn’t hurt anyone last night,” Sirius assured him. Except me, he thought with amusement.

There was relief on the man’s face for a moment, then terror took hold. “You know what I am?” he whispered, still not getting up.

“I know. Scourgify,” he added, removing the sticks and dirt from the man’s hair. He held up the extra robes he had made. “Put those on before you die of cold.”

They were both shivering, the naked man more violently. There was a moment where the man just stared at him in disbelief, then he rose with a groan to his feet and tried to take the robes in his shaking hands. Sirius was shocked. He was only a boy. The fierce werewolf that had given him so much trouble had an impressive amount of stubble on his chin, but was still baby-faced and skinny. Maybe

twenty years old. He took pity on him and held the robes open for the boy to step into, since he was having so much trouble controlling his hands. He didn't have a pair of shoes for him, so he cast a warming charm on his feet.

"Come with me," he said, turning toward the village he'd called home for the last few months.

The young man followed cautiously. "What will you do with me?"

"Nothing," Sirius answered simply. "Follow me."

"Who are you?"

"Call me John," he said. "I don't want to know your name. I know you don't want anyone to know about you."

There was a moment of silence, while the boy thought about what on earth he was planning to do if it wasn't discover his identity and turn him in. But he kept following.

"Can you Apparate?"

"Not very well."

"Do you have family?"

"My father."

"Does he know about you?"

"Yes."

"You can contact him when we get inside and have him come pick you up. You will Splinch yourself if you try to Apparate in your state."

"I know," the young werewolf replied dryly, giving Sirius a small chuckle as he tried to picture how the boy had come to figure that out.

It was still too early in the morning for anyone to be moving around town yet, so Sirius didn't worry about casting a Disillusionment charm on his companion. He led him down the cobbled side street to his own small home and opened the door.

"Come in," he said, gesturing the boy in front of him. He stepped through himself and breathed easier. It was warm in here, and dry. Harry had gotten a fire going already. He hadn't even expected the teenager to be out of bed yet.

Harry appeared in the doorway of his room, his hair sticking up in every direction and his eyes still half-closed with sleepiness. The state of his hair allowed Sirius to notice his dark roots showing. It was time to dye it again, probably for both of them, but he wasn't concerned about the young man noticing such a thing after his hard night. Harry took a look at their guest and sighed deeply.

"I figured you'd bring somebody home when you didn't come home right away," he said in English. "I got a fire going. You both look horrible."

"Wonder why that is?" Sirius said, rolling his eyes. "I'm going to clean up. Show him where the bath is and let him use Flint to send a message to his dad. Your German up to it?" he added. Not mockingly at all. Not even a little.

Harry scowled at him. "I'm going to send Flint back and go rescue Dudley."

"Dudley likes Africa," Sirius said firmly. "And owls are far more useful than retarded monkeys. For Merlin's sake, Evan, the monkey's been gone for nearly six months, give it a rest."

They both knew they were only joking, so when Harry passed him in the hall and shoved him with one shoulder, he shoved right back. Then he nearly fell over, and Harry gave him a Look.

“Go on, clean up, I’ll take care of your friend. The werewolf have a name?”

“No,” Sirius said, but Harry’s words hit him in the stomach. The past night had been hard, discovering the unfortunate man’s age harder still, but the way Harry said it was a real blow. He actually had a hard time breathing for a moment as he shut the door to his room and then sank down onto his knees on his floor.

“His name is Remus,” he whispered, and for a second was afraid he was actually going to cry. Then he groaned and let himself do so. He had to find Remus again. Someday. When he tracked down Peter, Remus would be the first one he’d force Peter to confess to. He worried about his old friend. Of them all, Remus was the one who really couldn’t make it on his own. He’d get by, but . . .

“Get it together, Padfoot,” he murmured to himself, and got to his feet. “You’ve got someone else to take care of today.”

When he came back out of his room, feeling warm and clean and very, very hungry, he headed straight for the kitchen. Their guest was sitting at the scarred wooden table in the corner and watching in silence while Harry put a pan on the stove. Sirius strolled over and saw the colourful remains of the diced vegetables in the sink.

“Oooo, great,” he said happily. “Omelets.”

“Peppers, onions, tomatoes, and cheese,” Harry said without turning away from his work. “I wanted to put in the leftover ham, but somebody ate it.”

“Oh, please,” Sirius said. “You only left me three cookies out of that plate of Christmas goodies Widow Bauer brought us.”

“You drank all the milk,” Harry returned.

“You ate that piece of fish I was saving for lunch last week.”

Harry turned around and fixed him with a very commanding look. "When you start doing the cooking, we'll talk."

"Is problem?" the young man at the table asked, looking worried. He obviously didn't speak enough English to understand their conversation, but it was good to know he spoke some. They had better watch what they said.

"Nein," Harry said, laughing a little. "We are joking," he said, his use of German still stiff and uncertain, but he kept a smile on his face so the stranger would feel comfortable. "My father and I are . . . strange . . ." He trailed off and looked at Sirius for help.

"He means we have an odd relationship," Sirius elaborated. "Sometimes I think he's the adult in this house."

Harry listened carefully, nodded, and turned back to the stove repeating Sirius' words under his breath. He made Sirius crack and beat the eggs and put the stranger to work shredding cheese while watched the vegetables he was softening. He put the omelets together while Sirius made coffee. He'd wanted the young man to set the table, but Sirius knew how tired the poor fellow was and let him sit back down. In Harry's mind, you worked for your meal. It had been revelatory to him upon beginning to live with Sirius that he was not going to be the only one doing the household chores, but Sirius was afraid he'd volunteered too often and turned Harry into quite the tyrant in the kitchen.

There was a bit of inconsequential talk over breakfast, and Sirius carefully avoided the young man's questions about how Sirius had found him, how he'd known to bring clothes with him, and so on. The less the kid knew, the better. Harry ate quickly and went back to bed, still looking tousled and grumpy. After they ate, Sirius directed the stranger to the chair by the fire, where he fell asleep. Sirius cleaned up the dishes and kept an eye on him.

He was only sleeping for about half an hour before a loud crack in the street outside told Sirius the young man's father had arrived, and he went to the door to meet him and bring him inside before he was

noticed. The sun was up and people would be going about their day by now. Sirius was pretty sure he would lose his job if people knew that after defending their town against werewolves, he invited the werewolves home. He'd managed to be secretive so far, even in this little place. They still didn't know how he fought them off.

A man with graying hair and a body as thick as his son's was lean stood in the street, slowly turning in a circle and looking at the houses on this row.

"Come inside," Sirius said, waving a hand to get his attention. He shut the door quickly. "He's here."

"Ah, wonderful," the man said, but Sirius cut him off before he could say anything else.

"No names, please. It's the best way to keep his secret safe."

The man's eyes shone with respect, and he nodded. He crossed the room and woke his son with a gentle shake to his shoulder. The young man's eyes blinked open and he yawned hugely.

"Come, I'll take you home now," the father said gruffly, which appeared to be his way of holding back emotions, since he looked drained and worried.

They both turned to face Sirius and said "Thank you," at the same time. They all three laughed. Then the barefoot kid in the borrowed robes stepped forward, solemn dignity descending on him, and shook his host's hand with wordless gratitude.

"You have been very kind," he said. "Not many wizards are kind to those like me."

Sirius held his hand in a firm grasp for an extra moment. "If you have another night like this, where you can't control it, try to come this direction. I'll make sure nothing happens."

The boy and his father smiled, and nodded, and departed with nothing else spoken. Nothing else needed to be. In this situation, actions spoke for themselves.

Harry came out of his room as soon as they were gone.

“Thought you were sleeping,” Sirius said.

Harry shrugged. “I’m awake now. You should get to bed.”

“Yeah,” Sirius agreed, turning to go that way.

“But tell me something first.”

Sirius sighed and turned back.

“Why’d you lie to him?”

“Hmm?”

“You’ve been lying to everyone.”

“What do you mean?”

“You acted like you brought your extra robes out there with you, like you weren’t the one who stopped that guy from attacking anyone, you acted like you haven’t got any real magical talent. I know you got out of practice for a while—”

“You mean not using magic for seven years in prison and then only using it for minor house repairs for another four?” Sirius quipped.

“Yes. But come on, Sirius. You’re better than that, and you’ve gotten back into practice now. You’re really good at all kinds of things, and you’re not even as bad at Potions as you say you are. What are you doing?”

Sirius gave him a grim look. "You know why we can't let on about my Animagus form?"

"Yeah."

"Same thing. John Rivers doesn't have the same skills that Sirius Black does. We got to be lax about things when we were in White Valley and in Rio de Janeiro. We can't afford that here."

Harry looked stricken. "Shouldn't I be doing something, then? To be less like me and more like Evan?"

"There isn't anything for you to do," Sirius said, shaking his head and smiling sadly. "You were just a face and a name. There's no reason Evan Rivers shouldn't be a brilliant and talented boy like you. I can always say you get it from your mother."

"Oh, right," Harry said, biting his lip while he thought. "I'm not good enough at this double personality thing," he said.

"Uh-oh," Sirius muttered. "You've got that look in your eye."

"I need to do some research. Remember when Jonny told us about government spies and double agents? I'll bet there's books."

"I shouldn't have encouraged the reading. I really shouldn't have," Sirius moaned, shaking his head. "Look what it's done to you. James would kill me."

"Whatever, my mother would have loved it."

"Probably," he snorted. "She was afraid you'd be just as big-headed as your father, and James would have you practicing Quidditch so often you'd be failing all your classes. Honestly, though," he said, putting his hand on Harry's shoulder, "they would both be very proud of you. Although I suspect that your, um, indiscretion, on your birthday would have had both of them horrified."

"It was so not fair of you to ask for the truth for your Christmas gift," Harry moaned, his face flooding with colour.

"I thought I taught you better than that," he said, grinning. "Getting trapped by a veela like that."

"You never told me about veelas," Harry muttered.

"She was only part veela, anyway," Sirius shrugged, "or you'd have been trying to recite a love sonnet in French whilst standing on a table. And you don't know French. I shudder to think."

Harry's eyes narrowed, then apparently decided a change of subject was in order. "I caught a bird yesterday."

"What?" Sirius asked, understandably confused since veelas and bird-catching had relatively little to do with one another.

"I was flying over the forest, and a bird came up out of a tree, and I caught it."

"Oh," Sirius said, not letting his jaw drop only through real effort. "That's great."

"I've either stunned you speechless or you need to get to bed worse than I thought."

"Both," Sirius said with a yawn so wide it was painful. "Making sure slobbering creatures don't kill you in your sleep is a full night's work."

"Aw, go on," Harry said, giving Sirius a high kick as he shuffled past. Sirius caught the kick on his forearm.

"I still practice, too, you know," he said dryly.

"Sweet dreams, John."

"Harry, go study for your lesson with Sascha and shut up."

Sirius collapsed onto his bed, ready to fall asleep immediately. He didn't, though. He started thinking about Remus again. He hadn't realized how this job would affect him, and he wondered if he would have still taken it had he known.

Likely, he thought with a grin. It was much more exciting than lifting crates. But still, he yearned for the moment to come when he could face his friend. Maybe they'd even be able to go after that two-faced Wormtail together. If only he could convince Remus of the truth without getting killed first. He wondered when he'd have the opportunity. Harry progressed in his studies at such an alarming rate that he'd probably be ready to face Voldemort before the snow had all melted.

But winter would pass into spring, and spring would very nearly become summer before Remus was to learn the truth. Nor would it be from Sirius that he would learn it.

Chapter Nineteen

“Your move,” Ron said, trying not to grin. He didn’t want to give away just how close to winning he was until his opponent made the fatal move that would give him a truly crushing victory.

“Hmmpf.” The haggard-looking man looked down at his king and said, “Sorry, mate, but I don’t see a way out of this. We lose.”

Ron’s sense of elation faded at this graceful exit that did not allow him to revel in destruction—but when the king bowed acceptance to fate, the game was no less his, so he retained his sense of pride. It had been a good game, an enjoyable game, playing against someone who really understood what chess was all about. He hadn’t found many people to play with him since they all figured out he could beat them. Granger, of course, the one opponent he really worried about, never played. She said wizard’s chess was “barbaric.” She would, being a girl.

“You are a very good player, Ron,” his professor said, shaking his hand to congratulate him on the game. “I knew you were brighter than you act in class.”

His tone was teasing, but Ron ducked his head, feeling a dull sense of shame at slacking in classes, a feeling that he didn’t know what to do with. “It’s just a stupid game,” he said dismissively.

“A stupid game?” Professor Lupin repeated, his voice sounding light, but his eyes very serious. “It’s a game of strategy and organization. It takes an intelligent person to be an excellent chess player.”

“I’m not excellent,” Ron muttered, his cheeks flushing.

“Maybe not excellent,” he teased again. “But you are good.”

Ron couldn’t help but smile, even though his ears were burning red. “Thanks, sir.”

“Now, then,” Professor Lupin said briskly. “I have essays to grade. Yours will no doubt be abysmal, since I know for a fact that you were playing Exploding Snap rather than putting the finishing touches on your essay last night.”

“I wasn’t!” Ron said. “I think your class is interesting, I was reading all about—” He stopped and looked at his professor’s twinkling eyes. “Fine, you know I’m not a complete dunce. I promise I’ll revise for my finals this week,” he conceded.

Ron packed up his chess set while he wondered over how Professor Lupin managed it—he seemed to know something about every one of them, and even acted like he cared. He was a really good teacher, too, he’d given them the most interesting lessons all year. The boggart had been really fascinating, even if it had turned into a huge hairy spider for him. Watching Neville stand in front of it was the really interesting part. The boggart had shifted from Dumbledore to Cornelius Fudge, to a handsome teenaged boy Ron didn’t recognize, and had seemed to be turning into Neville himself when Professor Lupin had stepped in and stopped it.

All in all, Lupin was by far the favourite of the students this year, and Ron appreciated the time he made for them all. He was a good man. He always seemed sick or tired, even to the point of needing a substitute for his classes a few times, but that just seemed to make him more dignified. He never let anybody, not even Professor Snape (who really had it in for him), ruffle him or make him lose his cool. Ron liked him more than any of his other professors. Ron wasn’t good at introspection or reviewing his emotions and motivations, or he might have realized by now that he respected and admired the man and was unconsciously trying to be more like him.

He entered the Gryffindor Common Room and didn’t see Seamus or Dean, so he headed for the staircase to put his chess set away in his room. His eye was caught by Granger and Longbottom poring over what looked like moon charts and hotly discussing some minor detail. Then he heard them saying Professor Lupin’s name, so he headed over. What did the professor have to do with lunar calendars? He’d told them they didn’t have to do that werewolf essay Snape had set

for them when he took over the class for the day.

“What are you two looking at?” he queried politely. He hadn’t noticed it in himself, but he’d ceased to open conversations at hostilely as he once did. He didn’t even mind the two misfits so much anymore, even if Granger’s cat kept trying to sneak up to his room to find Scabbers. After all, the cat hadn’t done anything since the train at the beginning of the year.

They both jumped like they were guilty of something.

“Nothing much, just looking something up,” Longbottom said quietly. “You started revising yet?”

“Not much,” Ron shrugged. “I’ve got to dig up my notes from Charms to look over tonight.”

“If you have any,” Granger snorted.

Ron scowled, but since he was working on being more dignified, did not rise to the bait. He also did not, even though it would probably be the best way to ensure a good grade, ask if he could study with her. He was trying to get along with his housemates better. His sister was only twelve and she was already really popular in Gryffindor, so how hard could it be?

“See you later,” he said simply, and bounded up the stairs to put away his chess set and feed Scabbers some rat tonic. He heard Longbottom saying he was going out to the greenhouse to see a new plant Professor Sprout had brought in.

Okay, sometimes he wondered how Longbottom got into Gryffindor.

Remus allowed himself a brief moment of pride. He had realized right away that Ron’s grating attitude was all bravado, that he was an insecure person overwhelmed by his own ideas of popularity and unable to live up to his expectations for himself. It was moments like that, showing Ron that chess was nothing to be ashamed of and

giving the boy his own niche to fit into, that made him really like this job. Ron had grown as a person this year just as much as he had as a student.

Remus wasn't used to people trusting him. He wasn't used to having those moments in his life. But the students, unexpectedly and unexplainably, seemed to like him. He wished he could say the same for the other teachers. Half of them had been around when he was at school, and they remembered him, and they treated each other with a cordial distance. Remus was tainted by more than just his lycanthropy. He was tainted by his past associations with a cruel and sadistic murderer. They seemed to think he should have known what Sirius was capable of, though they hadn't seen it coming any more than he had.

That was the hard part. That was always the part that drove him insane, kept him up at night, made it so he could never lay the past to rest. He hadn't seen it coming. There had been no warning signs. Sirius had been the same right up to the very last moment. Always laughing and acting outrageous, so tragically brave and loyal . . . and then suddenly he was betraying his best friend and murdering people? Remus knew they'd suspected him, not Sirius. He'd always been a little bit moody and quiet, he was the one destined for a difficult life without good connections, and he was the likely suspect. But Sirius? Everything he touched turned to gold. What could he possibly have gained by turning on them?

And then . . . Harry Potter. James and Lily's boy. That made even less sense yet. Even if for some reason Sirius had gone round the bend and done all that, what could possibly motivate him strongly enough to break out of Azkaban and go after an eight-year-old boy? His master was cast down and with not yet a hint of his return at that time, what could he have done it for? It didn't make any sense. It had never made any sense, and Remus wasn't getting any closer, over the years, to either figuring it out or laying it to rest. It was a hopeless, unending, haunting mystery that refused to leave him in peace.

"And sitting around feeling sorry for yourself won't help anything," he said to himself impatiently, and got up. "Severus isn't bringing the potion for an hour yet, I ought to make myself useful until then."

He was going to do something professor-like to put these thoughts away from himself for now. They would come back tonight with the full moon, and he would spend the night in agony despite the help of the potion Snape made for him. Still, for now, he could distract himself. Ah. He would go see what the Weasley twins were up to. With exams looming, they were altogether likely to create some massive disruptions to their schoolmates' studies. One would think that after their brush with evil and act of heroism a couple of years ago, they'd be fairly serious people, but they were just as devious as ever—which, he had to admit, he liked about them.

He located them in a deserted corridor that he was aware, as few people were, contained a secret passage out of the school. He had the sneaking suspicion that Fred and George were somehow in that minority with him. They were looking at a large parchment they held open between them and talking quietly to one another about what they were going to bring back from Zonko's that would be loud enough. Loud enough for what, Remus didn't know, but this was good evidence that he was correct about their intentions. They were paying absolutely zero attention to their surroundings, although to be fair he was walking as quietly as possible to catch them at it.

"Professor coming," one of them said in alarm.

They both looked up at him, one of them tapping the paper with his wand as surreptitiously as possible.

"Hello, Professor," they said in unison. It was uncanny, the way they always sounded like they'd rehearsed everything ahead of time.

"You've caught us arguing a point of Transfiguration theory," one of them said, gesturing vaguely to the parchment.

"Yes, your notes on the subject are remarkable," he said dryly, to point out that he was not fooled. The page had gone suspiciously blank.

“We were about to take down a couple of our thoughts, to ask Professor McGonagall later.”

Remus raised his eyebrows. “I’m sure you don’t mean to insult my intelligence, so I will assume you were always meaning to hand over that parchment for my inspection and simply haven’t gotten around to it yet.” He held his hand out. He believed he already knew precisely what it was, but he had to be sure.

The twins didn’t look upset, they almost looked eager. That nearly clinched it. They were expecting him to make a humorous attempt to read the parchment, so they could claim it was from Zonko’s and they’d staged this scene in the hallway so they could use it on somebody. It was certainly not the first time someone would do that, James had been quick with that one a time or two. Luckily for Remus, the twins didn’t actually know what they had their hands on. It was probably one of the more brilliant things he’d ever done in his life, even if it had been a group effort, and he was glad it had never become publicly known. The Weasley twins were bad enough.

He carefully folded it and put it in his pocket. “I will inspect it in my office and return it to you as soon as I am sure it is harmless,” he said calmly. “I’m sure you have exams you’d like to pass?”

Grumbling, they shuffled down the hall, making comments to each other about humourless old men with wands up their arses. He forced himself to make a jovial remark, to let them know that it was the map that had him on edge, not the boys themselves.

“Humourless young man, thank you!” he called out. He reflected ruefully that when he was fifteen, he’d thought thirty-three was ancient, too. He hadn’t realized then how long life would stretch out before him when he reached this age. It exhausted to think he’d only lived a third of his life.

He took the parchment back to his office and sat down at his desk, which had several neat stacks of essays to be graded. He ignored them, spread the parchment out before him, and drew his wand.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,” he said softly, tapping the page.

The ink bled up to form the familiar words, and he didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry. He hadn’t even thought of it in years, and now here it was in the hands of its creator.

“The Marauder’s Map. You did get us into trouble, didn’t you?” he addressed the map with a certain fondness. Trouble had seemed worth it for the escapades they’d had, at least at the time.

He gazed down at the crowded map, noting that at this time in the evening, most of the names were clustered on top of each other in common rooms and teacher’s offices. Dumbledore was up in his tower, pacing it looked like, a clever couple whose names he recognized from his sixth-year class had discovered an empty corridor on an upper floor to hide in, and there was Hagrid in his hut. He saw Professor Sprout standing fairly still in the middle of a greenhouse, and there was Neville Longbottom leaving the greenhouse and heading back towards the castle. And, then, coming toward Neville and meeting up with him was . . .

No.

It was not possible.

Remus’ heart thumped so hard that it was a tight pain in his chest. He could hear and feel the pulse beating in his head, and there was a faint roaring noise in his ears. He was dizzy. His vision sharpened onto a single point on the map. Onto that name.

It could not be.

This was a dream.

He’d let his memories drive him mad, it was the only explanation. There was no way that what he was seeing could be real. It was not possible for Neville Longbottom to meet up with Peter Pettigrew.

“Peter Pettigrew is dead,” he mumbled, his voice hardly sounding like him. He continued to stare. He was looking at a convincing piece of evidence that Peter Pettigrew was not only not dead, but getting around just fine. Around here, in fact. Walking beside Neville Longbottom and definitely not heading toward the school, now.

There was a knock on the door that made him jump in surprise so badly that he cracked his neck. “Professor?”

“Oooo,” he replied, squinting with pain, his hand going to his neck. “Mr. Weasley?”

“Her stupid cat,” Ron said, his voice trembling with anger. “Her stupid cat got Scabbers. I can’t find him anywhere.”

His head was starting to make wild leaps, trying to explain how what he was seeing was possible.

“How long have you had Scabbers?” He knew his voice sounded queer, but he couldn’t help it.

“Er, I dunno,” Ron said in confusion. “He was Percy’s before he was mine, I’m not sure—”

“Twelve years, I’d say.”

He stood up, feeling strangely detached from his body. It was moving, floating along, while his brain was occupied with attempting to sort this out. There was only one way he was going to be able to do that. He looked down at the map, and he thought his heart stopped. They were moving toward the Whomping Willow. Peter was taking Neville through the Shrieking Shack, outside the school wards, so he could Apparate. He was trying to take Neville somewhere. Their names, serenely moving across the page, only reflected movement, not whether each step was marked with struggle and argument. He hoped Neville was fighting back.

He tapped the map to erase it, a process so ingrained in him that he remembered to do it even now. “I’m sorry, if you’ll excuse me,” he

said breathlessly, and walked down the corridor, leaving Ron dumbfounded by his behaviour. Ron went back to the Gryffindor dormitories to seek out Hermione, while Remus had started running. The halls were nearly empty, or he'd have been knocking over the smaller children on his way past.

Severus Snape walked into the vacated office, carefully holding a vessel of potion that gave off wafts of smoke. He looked around.

“Lupin?”

When there was no answer, he shrugged, set the goblet on the desk amidst the ungraded essays, and left.

Neville tried to fight off the Body Bind that had been cast on him, but he wasn't able to. The other wizard had taken his wand before he'd done anything else, seeming to realize that Neville would try to challenge him if he had the opportunity. He'd been taken completely by surprise. He was still dumbfounded. He'd been walking back from the greenhouse after admiring Professor Sprout's new Venemous Tentacula, and he'd been alone. He knew he had been.

The wizard who was levitating him along had sprung up out of the ground, or at least it had seemed that way. One minute he was nowhere, the next he seemed to bulge outward like he was growing from a seed. Didn't grow much, Neville thought spitefully. The shabby little man was short and round and hardly looked like any kind of threat. Just typical for him that he'd get himself in this situation with such an incapable-looking man. He very deliberately did not think about the hypocrisy of a boy of his stature thinking that way about anyone.

There was a tunnel he'd never known of directly under the infamous Whomping Willow. Neville's head scraped the ceiling painfully and his legs bumped the floor, despite the wizard trying to levitate him sideways, laid out full-length on his stomach. The blood was rushing into his face and making him more uncomfortable by the moment. He wanted to ask where they were going, what the man wanted with him, but he couldn't open his jaws, and his mumbles were useless. He was learning nearly enough just from listening to the man talk to

himself. He seemed to be quite mad, for one thing. He was used to talking to himself and not expecting anyone to hear him.

“Back in our old haunt,” he was saying as they exited the tunnel and came up an extremely dusty, dingy old staircase. He scrubbed a hand through pitifully thin and ratty hair, and peered around every corner as though a ghoul would leap out at them any moment now. “Back when we were friends,” he added, sounding achingly lonely. Neville wondered who he was, felt sad for him. “They’d hate me for stealing Ron’s wand after he was so kind to me, even if I needed it.” There was a moment’s pause. “Drop in the bucket, after all that happened. But it was necessary,” he said firmly to himself, leading Neville up another staircase. “If I wanted to live, I had to give him James and Lily, that was the deal.”

Surely he didn’t mean . . . James and Lily Potter? This was not Sirius Black. Neville knew what Black looked like. But who else could be speaking this way?

“And now I’ve got to get back to him.” The man was beginning to sound tired and eager at the same time. Neville was beginning to wish he didn’t have to listen, whatever he might find out. What a whiner. “Back to the Dark Lord. He’ll be angry with me for not returning sooner, of course he will, he’ll have been wanting his servants. But I’ve got Neville Longbottom, that will make him happy. He’s Dumbledore’s fake. It’s not Harry Potter, of course, but I can’t get him. My lord will love to see Dumbledore’s plans crushed, I know he will. I’ll bring him such a present, give him the boy, he’ll be happy to see me. You’ll get your reward, Wormtail.”

They were going outside, Neville realized dully. They were going to Apparate somewhere away from Hogwarts, away from the castle and any help he could hope for. He was being taken to Voldemort. And he was not ready to face him. Death could only be minutes away, and the first thing he felt was a strange relief that it would be over. If he allowed himself, he would feel sad that he hadn’t said goodbye to Gran and his family (even Mum and Dad deserved a goodbye), or to Hermione and Ginny, or to Professor Dumbledore. They would wonder what had happened to him. And Professor Sprout would cry

and say she'd been right there and hadn't noticed anything happening. He felt bad about that. And he felt very bad that he couldn't do what he was supposed to do. He was going to fail Dumbledore, he wasn't going to finally put an end to all this. But still . . . to never have to be the other Boy-Who-Lived again. To never lay awake at night wishing this had never happened to him, that Gran hadn't allowed Dumbledore to come in that day when Harry Potter was taken. That was something.

"Hermione was so excited to see if she was right about Professor Lupin," he mumbled through his stiffened mouth, deciding his thoughts had just as much right to be heard as the crazy man's. "Tonight's the full moon, and we were going to find out together. I wonder if she realizes I'm gone yet. I'll bet the professor will change any minute."

"Stop."

The wizard froze, and consequently so did Neville. Neville was dumbfounded. It could only be that he was thinking about Professor Lupin that made him believe he was hearing the man's voice.

"Put him down, Peter."

The shifty little man spun around, the wand he said he'd stolen from Ron—did he mean Ron Weasley?—turning on the owner of the voice behind him. Neville dropped to the floor, and he immediately scrambled up and grabbed his own wand.

"Expelliarmus!" he cried, and reached for the stolen wand when it flew from the wizard's hand. He fumbled it, but it didn't much matter. Professor Lupin was the one standing there, and he had his wand trained on the suddenly disarmed man.

"It is you," the professor said, his eyes wide and disbelieving. "I saw you. On the map, on our map, and that map is never wrong. I didn't believe it, but . . ." He looked at Neville. "What did he want with you?"

“He said he was bringing me to Voldemort as a bribe,” Neville said calmly, straightening up as he retrieved the wand from the floor. He was fine, now that he had a wand in his hand and a witness to whatever might happen. “You know him?”

“I thought I did.” The professor sounded hoarse and cold. His voice was very cold. “Apparently not.” He was staring at the man with calculating eyes. “It’s not hard to figure out, now that I see you’re alive. You staged it. You killed those people. You set Sirius up.” He shook his head, his forehead furrowed. “But why? To get the location out of him?”

The other man gave him a sly smile full of ugly yellowed teeth. “I had the location all the time, Remus.” His face twisted with sudden hatred. “You thought I was so useless, didn’t you? Never as smart as the great Remus Lupin, never as clever as Sirius Black, never as brave or handsome. But it was me they picked to keep their secrets.”

“Secrets you betrayed, you mean.”

“I had to, Remus.” His voice had turned to pleading. Neville wrinkled his nose. What an impossibly annoying man this was. “He was going to kill me if I didn’t tell him, he would have killed me, you would have done the same—”

“You think so, Peter? You think I would have, knowing what you do about how much those friends meant to me?”

“It was the only way,” he wailed.

Professor Lupin looked like he had a retort ready, but Neville rolled his eyes.

“I guess that makes you Peter Pettigrew, doesn’t it?”

They both seemed to have forgotten him, and looked at him with surprise.

“You coward and liar,” Neville said, staring the man down. “You’re a murderer, and you put an innocent man in jail. You don’t deserve to say another word in your own defense, your actions are indefensible. So just shut up.”

Peter Pettigrew gaped at him, then suddenly rushed on him with a cry, grasping hands raised to take back his wand. Neville gasped and hurried to raise his, but the professor got there first.

“Stupefy!” he shouted with fury. Pettigrew was blasted backward in a wash of red light and hit the wall, raising a cloud of dust. The professor stood there, his knuckles white on his wand and his other hand clenched into a trembling fist. He was in the grip of some kind of awful rage, and Neville realized the situation was still volatile, whether Pettigrew was knocked out or not.

“Thank you, sir,” he said quietly. “Let’s get back to the castle, then.”

The tension slowly left Professor Lupin’s hands, and he lifted his head from Pettigrew’s unconscious form to look at Neville.

“Yes,” he said, sounding as though he were waking from a long sleep. “Yes, you’re right. We need to go.”

Neville thought there would have been a poetic justice in him levitating Pettigrew back through the passage to the school, but Professor Lupin did it. Pettigrew got a hard knock on the head from a root when they entered the underground tunnel, but the professor seemed to repent of it and the trip was smooth until they clambered back out. It was silent, for the most part, but Neville had a burning question that could not wait any longer.

“Sir?”

“Yes?”

“If he set Sirius Black up, and Sirius was innocent . . . then why would he kill Harry Potter?”

“Well, the most obvious answer that comes to me is that he didn’t,” the professor replied, his face working with emotion.

Neville wiped at the sheen of sweat building up on his forehead from the dankness of the passage. He could hear a steady dripping sound somewhere, but as they got closer to the entrance, it was drowned out by the rushing of wind through the branches of the Whomping Willow.

“He’s alive somewhere, then.”

“It seems likely.”

“But why?”

“Sirius is an escaped convict. I’m sure he thought no one would believe his innocence. He fled.”

“With the Potter boy?”

“It would appear so.”

Neville stopped asking questions. Obviously, the professor neither knew the answers nor cared to contemplate them. The whys could wait. The all-important fact remained. Harry Potter was not dead. Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, the symbol of hope, was out there somewhere. Which meant Neville himself had lost that position just as suddenly as he’d gained it. He didn’t know how he felt about that.

“Sir, do you think . . . sir?”

They had left the passage and the cool night air felt good to Neville. The twinkling stars and bright, moon-lit ground seemed incongruously cheery. But the professor had stopped and gone stone-still. His head tilted back, his mesmerized gaze on the sky.

“No,” he whispered. “Mr. Longbottom, take him, I have to get back to the castle now.” And he started to run.

“The moon,” Neville muttered. “Oh, no.”

Only a few yards away, the professor stumbled and fell to the ground. He did not get up again, and Neville shivered. He gripped his wand tightly. He saw the professor change. Saw the werewolf get up.

A long, lonely howl reverberated through the breezy night air.

“At least Hermione and I were right,” he muttered.

The werewolf’s glowing eyes locked on him. It loped forward, then gained speed.

Neville started screaming, his wand in his shaking fist, his voice rising in pitch as the werewolf streaked toward him—and shot right past him. Neville spun around to see the werewolf chasing something small and close to the ground. A rabbit? No, a rat.

Peter’s empty clothes lay on the ground.

“Merlin’s beard, he’s an Animagus!” Neville gasped. He stared after the disappearing figure for a moment, then he grabbed hold of the two abandoned wands and made a run for it. He wanted to be back in the castle before the werewolf decided the rat wasn’t a big enough meal.

“Neville wouldn’t give your secret away, I assure you that he wouldn’t,” Dumbledore said quietly.

Remus shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. I can’t put the children at risk any longer. I’m sorry, sir.”

“I understand, dear boy.” Dumbledore’s eyes were sad, and locked on his intensely. He couldn’t look away, no matter how he wanted to.

“Ron’s disappointed,” he said, for lack of anything better to say. “I daresay some of my other students are, as well, but it’s for their sake I’m doing it. Neville . . . he isn’t really talking to anyone right now.”

Dumbledore nodded, placing his steepled fingers on his desk. "Not even to me. I will keep trying. Neville is . . . he is a wonderful boy. He'll get through this." He reached out and patted Remus' hand. "We will track down Peter, I assure you, and then we will be able to clear Sirius' name. I, for one, am glad to hear that you were right to have been his friend all along. With any luck, it won't take long before the rest of the world will be allowed to know. I am certain his innocence will be on the front page of the Daily Prophet, once we let the knowledge become public."

"Whether we clear his name or not, how is he to know it?" Remus objected, suddenly angry with the old man for acting so calm, acting like the entire world as he knew it wasn't shattering apart. "He's in hiding, for Merlin's sake, we can't just send a letter!"

Dumbledore's eyes took on a twinkle. "Do I remember correctly that he used to read the newspaper front to back every day?"

Confused, and therefore calmed, Remus just nodded. "He did."

"Perhaps you can think of a way to communicate with him through that?"

"Perhaps I could," Remus said thoughtfully. Nearly involuntarily, he smiled. He had an idea.

Ireland made it to the World Cup. Sorry, there's no way we can go to it without being recognized. Maybe next year, yeah?

Harry pulled the note off his door, crumpled it up, and tossed it in the bin on his way to the kitchen. He tried not to be too disappointed. There had been little chance that he'd get to go, anyway. Besides, he had far more preoccupying thoughts. He'd had a letter from Charlie Weasley about a shipment of dragons he and the guys were going to be taking into England in a few months. The first Tri-Wizard Tournament in recent memory. It did explain the unparalleled amount of foreign wizards passing to and fro across what seemed to be all of Western Europe. It was making Harry very uneasy to realize how

international relations were progressing. Merlin knew what Sascha might let slip, or to whom, the next time he went to the city.

He wasn't even halfway through breakfast before Sirius came in, slumping and looking pale and weary. There was blood down the front of his shirt. Harry grimaced and jumped to his feet, abandoning his cereal. He put an arm around Sirius and allowed his godfather to sling an arm over his shoulders. He led him directly to his bed.

"You got bit?"

Sirius nodded, wincing and covering his neck with his hand. "Stupid bugging vampires," he whispered. "I swear there's a coven that has it in for me. Merlin help me, I shouldn't have gotten the werewolves around here organized enough to help each other and stay under control. I'd rather have them over these stupid vampires any day."

"I'll be back in a second," Harry promised after he'd laid him down. He went to the hall closet where they kept medical supplies and returned with a Blood Replenishing potion and a fresh bandage to cover the raw patch of skin. He treated Sirius as best he could, giving him a glare when Sirius smacked his lips with distaste and tried to push half the potion away. "Drink it. It doesn't taste that bad."

"How would you know?"

"Sascha made me try it when we brewed it, that's why. I have to taste everything, even the poison. I told you that. He wants me to recognize everything by taste and smell." Harry shuddered, remembering some of the really foul things he'd had to swallow in the last year. "I'm learning a lot," he said quietly.

"Don't sound so happy about it," Sirius mumbled, getting sleepy now that he was in bed and being cared for. "You act like it's a bad thing."

"No, I'm just regretting that I won't have Sascha as a teacher anymore."

"What do you mean? He moving or something?"

“No, we are.”

Sirius squinted at him. “Have I fallen asleep? I’m dreaming, aren’t I?”

“No, I’m serious. The world is getting awfully crowded around here. We need to get further away.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Somewhere . . .” Harry hesitated. “Somewhere where I can be normal for a while. Well, normal for me, anyway, whatever that means. Just somewhere I don’t have to think about England or what might be coming for me.”

“What? Why? What happened to becoming a warrior, like you’ve always talked about?”

Harry bit his lip. “I know. It’s just . . . I have this feeling, you know? Like my future is pretty dark. I want to go somewhere to ignore it while I still can. Because I don’t think I’ll be able to very much longer.”

He might have said more, but Sirius had started snoring. Harry left him and went to study the Charms lesson Sirius had written for him. He had three-hour long session with Sascha this afternoon, as Sascha had promised to devote some time to practical application of this Charms lesson that he was supposedly taking from an old textbook rather than from Sirius. He was committed to his education for as long as he was getting it, even if he was planning to be out of here within the month.

When he came back from Sascha’s, Sirius was awake and had some sausages and potatoes cooking in a skillet on the stove. He was putting most of their dishes into some boxes scattered around the table.

“You’re right,” he said without preamble when Harry shut the front door. “I’d rather you have as much time to be a boy as I can possibly give you. We’re going to Australia.”

“Why Australia?” Harry asked, amused by how quickly Sirius got organized when his mind was made up about something.

“I set up a job interview with a school for boys about your age. I’d be teaching basic Defense coursework. I saw the ad in the Daily Prophet. It was supposed to be an exciting position for a recent graduate who wanted to travel the world, but I hardly think they’ll object to someone with a little more experience.”

“Likely not,” Harry agreed. “You done with the paper, then?”

Sirius looked up. “I didn’t finish the classifieds yet,” he said, then shrugged. “Oh, well.”

Harry crumpled up the classified section and used it to cushion some drinking glasses. He didn’t know how painstakingly the now-crushed ad in his hand had been written, or how its author had tears of both frustration and joy running down his face as he wrote it. Had he known what was in his hand, the next year of his life would have been quite different. But Harry didn’t read the classifieds.

Found: a pet garden rat, missing a toe on the front paw. For information, contact Moony in London.

“I’ll have to cancel my subscription until we find a place to live,” Sirius said regretfully. “You’ll have to remind me to pick it up again, I’ll probably forget.”

“You could just read the paper in Australia,” Harry suggested. “They’ll probably report any really important stuff happening in England, anyway.”

“Probably right. Hand us a few pages of that, would you? Thanks.”

Chapter Twenty

He ran.

Through the fire, past the screaming women, as far as he could. This was his only chance, and he would not mess it up. A bunch of drunken, rowdy fans who'd gone too far had created just enough chaos for him to make good on the escape that he'd thought of for years since. The adrenaline pumping through his system was on such an overload that he could ignore the painful jostling of the frightened crowd and his own harsh breathing. At last. At last, he would be free. Free of his captor and of that damn house elf who never let him out of her sight. He grinned at the thought, even while he ducked past a burning tent. He was certainly out of her sight now.

A frightened, wailing figure came hurtling through the smoky gloom and bowled him over, sending him rolling into a tree. Slightly stunned, he lay there coughing and wheezing. He hadn't run in so long, he'd nearly forgotten how. He could hardly breathe, and the smoke wasn't helping. Confused people ran by, outlined by flickering light and then muddled by smoke. It gave the silhouettes an oddly distorted look, but he had no time to watch them.

He struggled to his feet. His master. His master would be waiting for him. His poor master, whose servants were all captured or fled, and having to hide in his weakened state. He would need them, anyone who could get back to him.

He coughed again, trying to clear his lungs of smoke. He heard the shouts of people trying to take charge, to create some order. Ministry. His heart skipped, and his system flooded again. He hadn't believed the number of Ministry officials who had come to see or officiate the Quidditch World Cup, and he'd thought of revealing himself and getting his father sent to prison. However, that plan would lead to him being returned to prison himself, and that seemed like an inexcusable waste of his ability to throw off the Imperius curse at last. So, he'd taken his opportunity to escape. That escape would be short-lived if his father were in the group heading this way. He could see them rounding up the crowd and putting out fires.

He ran.

Sleeping on the ground. Eating plants he hoped were edible. Sleeping in a tree. Eating wild berries. Not sleeping. Not eating. The weeks of his searching blurred together. It had gotten better when he'd crept up on a particularly careless wizard who was staggering drunkenly along a country road on his way home from a tavern, and had stolen his wand. After that, he'd been able to make a fire and multiply the scanty leavings of nature so he could eat enough. It had taken these past weeks for him to learn again how to use a wand, the beautiful art of doing magic. It had been so long since he had, and his skills were rusty. It had been hard work, and in bad conditions. He'd been wet and cold too much of the time.

And it had all led to this moment.

He trembled.

He got on his knees, put his head down, and shook like a leaf in the wind.

"Master," he rasped past his sore throat. He'd gotten sick during his journey, but he forced the words out. "I've returned to you. They tried to keep me hidden, they tried to imprison me, but I've come back."

He dared not lift his face, not until the Dark Lord spoke to him. The great snake he called Nagini was coiling around him, tongue flicking out to get the sense of him. He forced himself to stay still, to give it no cause to attack him. He didn't mind snakes, normally, but this was not a normal snake.

"You have been faithful," the thin, queer voice said. "I am glad of your return."

Relieved, and elated, he looked up. He suppressed a shudder at the sight of his poor master, the skeletal child-like body he was forced to inhabit. It wasn't fair. It was eerie, to see those frightening eyes burning out of that ridiculous body.

“I disgust you, Bartemius?” the high, pitiful voice queried.

He shivered. “No, my lord. I am only sorry, sorry that you are forced into this humble situation, so much less than you deserve—”

“Enough.” He seemed to have little patience for the flattery that had always been natural. “It will not last, I will have a body again. Now get up.” The snake hissed, and slithered out of the room, seeming to sense that her presence was no longer necessary.

He stood, trying not to cough or sneeze to reveal his illness and appear weak. His eyes flickered over the squat man standing beside his master’s chair. His master had weak servants already. “How, my lord? What will you do, how can I help?”

“Wormtail has been telling me stories,” he said, sounding amused, of all things. “He has been telling me the stories that wizards tell each other about Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom.”

“Yes, my lord, I have heard them. How your servant killed the boy, and how the other boy is a hero now. But your servant has not returned to you, the coward—”

“Do not be foolish.” The command should have been less than impressive, coming from the ugly thing before him, issued in that quavering little voice. It wasn’t. He shut up. “Sirius Black was no servant of mine. This is Peter Pettigrew, you see, who was too frightened of what I would do to him if he didn’t return to stay away, no matter how much he wanted to. I doubt he would have returned at all if he had another place to go.”

“It is not true, my lord,” the watery-eyed man cried out, “I live to serve you—”

“Quiet, Wormtail.” The red, burning eyes fixed on Barty again. “Harry Potter is alive, somewhere. I do not know how he survived that night, but I will find out. I will find the boy, and I will use him to resurrect myself to my former glory. My mortal enemy will provide the

key ingredient for the ritual. And then I will crush him. He must be found!"

Barty jumped at the shout. "Yes, my lord," he stammered. "How shall we do that?"

"I will give that task to you, my servant. You will find the boy. He will be with Black, I am certain of it. You have only to locate them and bring the boy to me. I care nothing for the man, kill him when you find him."

He nodded slowly. This was going to be an impossible task. He hardly knew where he could begin. His eyes flickered over to the other man, standing beside his master, fit only to play nursemaid and stay in the shadows.

"I will not disappoint you," he said.

"Because you know the price of that," his master said, nearly laughing.

He shuddered. Yes, he knew.

"You will rest tonight. Begin tomorrow."

The snake returned to the room as he turned to go with a bow and a final murmured, "yes my lord." Its undulating body gave him a sick fascination, and he watched it coil around its master, a servant just as he was.

One day, everyone would serve the Lord Voldemort. Or they would be dead.

Harry woke up at a clap of thunder and sat up straight in bed. He wiped sweat from his forehead and nearly threw up as he fought off the surge of joy rippling in the pit of his stomach. Lord Voldemort had gained a competent servant, and Harry had to struggle not to feel his happiness over it. When he realized that, the nausea increased, and he jumped out of bed, breathing deeply.

He slipped his glasses on and went to the kitchen of their small home for a glass of water. A strong breeze gusted through the room, and he hurried to shut the windows they'd left open. Their house was built in the old pre-air conditioning Queensland style of large doors and windows, which was great on breezy summer days in Brisbane, but not so great when they were having a thunderstorm in September.

He'd had a very similar dream to this one a few weeks ago. A dream about Voldemort killing an old man who had come to see about the lights in the window of a supposedly deserted house.

It unnerved him, to be having these dreams. He never thought he had that much imagination, and now he was dreaming of Voldemort planning to come after him. Detailed dreams with a grossly diminished figure needing constant aid, but they still frightened him. He drank his water and put the unease he was feeling aside. He was having these dreams because he had begun to worry about Voldemort. Ever since they'd talked to Bill Weasley, he'd wondered when the man who'd murdered his parents would reemerge. But he'd been quiet, and that was strangely worse than daily news about his atrocities. It was Harry's fretting that was causing him to dream about sending servants to track him down.

He sat down at the table, which still had his homework spread out on it. He'd only been attending Sirius' school for a week, and they were already giving out homework. The school bored him. The ideas were so basic. He slept through his combination Astronomy/Divination class, and Sirius purposely never called on him in his class so the other students wouldn't realize Harry knew everything he was teaching. Maybe his previously unsuspected imagination was asserting itself just because his brain didn't have anything better to do.

His water gone and the thoughts still plaguing him, he decided to do something he hadn't done in months. He went to the one window he'd left open, clambered up on the sill with his hands clutching either side for balance, and transformed into an owl.

Feeling freed of all worries and responsibilities alike, he soared up over the city and headed for the Brisbane River, ready to explore a little. Just for now, he could forget those dreams.

A crack echoed across the barren landscape of scrubby bushes and dusty back roads. One Bartemius Crouch, Jr. had arrived at the outskirts of a town called White Valley, Wyoming. He arrived weary from stress and overwork. It had taken him far too long to get to this point. It had taken him most of a month just to figure out which country to start in.

The plan hadn't been much of anything. He knew that Black would need money, and he knew that the Gringotts goblins didn't cater to wizards when they could help it. So he snuck back into his family home (and what a job that had been) and stolen his dead mother's goblin-made jewelry from his father's room. His father, who was rarely at home, likely hadn't noticed even now. He was far too busy overseeing that ridiculous tournament that seemed to have all of wizarding Europe captivated. The bribe had gotten him the information he needed. The goblins had (his informant told him with obvious glee) charged Black an exorbitant rate to exchange a small portion of the money he'd withdrawn into Muggle currency.

Barty had spent weeks doing nothing but casting Imperius curses and memory charms on people who worked in the Muggle transportation industry. Weeks it had taken him to find such old information, but find it he had—a man named Sirius Black and his “son” Harry Black had purchased airplane tickets from London to New York City. From there, he had based his search upon how much Muggle money he thought Sirius had. He'd searched the seedier places until he found one ancient and talkative old man with a smoker's rasp who remembered Sirius and Harry. He didn't know why they'd chosen such a place, but he knew they'd headed for Wyoming when they left.

Barty hadn't known why Wyoming, either, until he arrived in Carson City, sat down in a bar, and heard two truckers talking about what a weird little trailer park of a town White Valley was. They found the people there to be unusual, although they hadn't said why. They'd been eyeing him like he was unusual himself, despite his Muggle clothes. They'd talked in voices loud enough that he understood he

was meant to overhear that there was no reason for foreigners to be in their bar. He'd finished his drink and left as quickly as possible.

So, now Barty had come to White Valley to find out why it was strange. It was the only lead he had after literally months of trying. He trudged into town, wrinkling his nose fastidiously at what a trashy place it seemed to be. A man from the proud pureblood Black family, living here? He must have been mistaken to come.

He was hailed by a man on the street as though they were longtime friends. Which they were not, nor would they ever be.

"Hey, there, stranger. What brings you to town?"

"I doubt that is your business," he said crisply.

The man grinned, his face crinkling. He looked sunburnt so often that his face had turned to tanned leather. "You must be a friend of Sirius and Harry."

He must have showed how startled he was. The man laughed.

"We don't get too many people showing up from other countries. You sound just like 'em. Like I said, what brings you to town?"

"I'm looking for them," Barty answered simply. Merlin, it couldn't be this easy, could it? Had Black no survival instinct at all? "Are they in town?"

"No, not for a while," the man answered.

"I see. Do you know where they've gone?"

"Not me." The stranger put his hands in his pockets, frowned thoughtfully, then spat into the dirt. "You'd probably wanna ask Mona. If anybody knew, she would."

"Mona, was it?"

“Yep. She lives up this street here,” he said, pointing. “Third house down, the one with the real nice shutters. Sirius made ‘em for her,” he added helpfully. “Never saw a man who could get work like that done so fast. Had ‘em painted and everything in one day.”

Barty nearly danced with glee, but restrained himself. He had certainly come to the right place. There was no longer any doubt they were talking about the same man.

“Thank you,” he said gravely to the man, who spat again, nodded, and walked onward, his duty as Chamber of Commerce seemingly fulfilled. Barty knocked on the door of this person Mona’s house, and suddenly understood why Black, with his complete disregard for everything his family stood for, had made this woman shutters. If she were a witch, she’d be gorgeous. As it was, she was severely lacking.

“Hello. I’ve come to town looking for Sirius Black, and I was told you might know where he’s living now. Have I come to the right place?” he asked, trying to sound polite and innocent.

“Why are you looking for him?” the woman responded.

Under the surface, his anger surged. How dare she question him? He was a skilled wizard and Lord Voldemort’s most trusted servant, and she—she was nothing, she was so beneath him she should be grateful he deigned to speak to her. He wanted to show her just what a nothing she was, as he’d wished to show those truckers in Carson City, and so many Muggles, but he restricted himself to wishing. His master had commanded him to be inconspicuous, and a trail of bodies was hardly that.

Outwardly, he smiled.

“I’m a solicitor, you see. Sirius has come into some money, and I’m trying to find him to make sure he receives it.”

“Oh,” she said, not seeming to warm to him in the slightest. Maybe he should try to smile more believably in the future. He would have to work on that. Keeping a low profile meant he had to act like a Muggle.

Being a Muggle was a lot harder than it looked, no matter how much he cheated when no one was watching.

“Unfortunately,” Barty continued when it seemed that Mona had no plans to speak up, “he has always had a tendency to be a little disorganized, and he hasn’t kept the family informed of his whereabouts in years.”

“He said he didn’t have a family,” she said, her face stony.

Really, this woman was impossible.

He chuckled, as if sharing a joke with her. “When he hears of the death that has caused his inheritance, I’m sure he will be eager enough to claim the rest of them. It’s quite a large sum, you see. I’m very close to his remaining family, they were most eager for me to track him down.” He made a self-deprecatory gesture with his hands. “I do my best for them. They haven’t seen Harry since he was little more than a baby, they all miss him terribly.”

This struck a chord with her, he saw. She warmed to him against her will at the idea that Harry had a family who missed him. He couldn’t dismiss motherly feelings entirely, after what his mother had done for him, but he still considered this Mona woman a complete sap.

“Japan,” she said at last. “They were on their way to Kyoto. They didn’t really say why, except that they thought it sounded interesting.”

“Ah, I see. Thank you ever so much,” he said, shaking her hand firmly. “I appreciate your help more than I can say.”

She didn’t return his enthusiasm, but her return grip was strong. He thought she might even be growing on him, now. She was such a pathetically defiant little creature.

“When you do catch up with them, will you tell them something? Let them know that Buster and Two Rivers have passed on. They’ll want to know that.”

“Of course,” he said with his best attempt at sincerity. He didn’t give a Knut who those people were and planned to say nothing to Black or Potter beyond the words necessary to kill the former and take the latter to his master.

Mona waited until he had gone before she stuck her head out the kitchen window and told Jonny he and his friends could transform back now, she wasn’t in danger. The animals crouched and ready to spring into action disappeared, replaced by a group of boys in their late teens, and her son walked out from the group to ask her in a low voice,

“Mom, why were you so rude to him?”

“He’s a lawyer,” she answered simply, not explaining how the custody battle with his father when he was three had coloured her opinion of the profession. “They’re all liars.”

It was with near-exhaustion that Barty arrived at the door of a three-bedroom house in a middle-class neighborhood that resembled the scrubby trailer park of White Valley not at all. It had been a long search. He’d thought his trip to Japan had been fruitful, as he had been able to learn that Harry and Sirius had visited a particular Buddhist temple nearly every day and a particular brothel several times, as well. One of the girls in the brothel had known they went to Brazil, and Barty had started his search in Brazil by looking for temples and prostitutes. He expected no better of Sirius Black, the blood-traitor.

But the information from Japan was useless. Their tastes had apparently changed between the two countries, and Barty was getting grumpy just from having to travel so much. Did Black never stop moving? He discovered nothing, absolutely nothing, until he moved from Sao Paulo where he’d started, to Rio de Janeiro where some folks in a hokey bar remembered the handsome Englishman. He’d taken up with one of their favourite local girls and permanently removed her from the market. After hearing that, it wasn’t hard to find out where the girl lived. Despite not being available anymore, they still made it their business to know where she lived.

So now here he was, knocking on another door. He didn't know if Sirius would still be here, he'd gotten conflicting reports on that.

A man answered the door, and Barty nearly killed him on the spot. If a strange man lived here, Sirius obviously did not. He would have to hit the road again. Barty was beginning to hate his work. He still wished to serve Lord Voldemort, of course, but couldn't his master send someone else to do this work? Was there nothing else he could do for the Dark Lord? He'd rather milk the snake and let that idiot Pettigrew waste his time trying to find these two.

"What do you want?"

"I'm looking for Sirius Black."

The door slammed in his face. He knocked again. And he kept knocking, knowing that sheer annoyance would bring the man to the door again. He wished he had permission to blast the door down and demand answers at the tip of his wand. Yet he didn't even have permission to use Veritaserum or an Imperius curse unless there was no other way.

The door flew open again.

"He is not here!" the lean, muscled man barked out. "He doesn't live here now!"

Barty stuck his foot in the doorway to ensure the man didn't close it on him again. "Do you know where he does live? I'm a solicitor, you see. Sirius has come into some money, and—"

"I don't know where he is, and I don't care. You understand me? He break my sister's heart and if I see him, I kill him. So it's good I don't know where he went, right? He ran off and left her with nothing. I don't know you, I don't want to, if you're a friend of his. Go away!"

The man gave him a hard shove, and he was forced to stumble back. The door slammed shut again. Barty growled as he turned away and

went to make contact with his master. He was going to ask permission to kill this insolent Muggle. He needed some way to vent his frustration at this dead end. How was he supposed to know where to go next, if this guy didn't know? His sister likely would, Barty thought, and was keeping the information from her brother. Watching her brother die would likely loosen her tongue considerably.

When he was out of sight of the house, Miguel finally turned away from the window, and went to the kitchen, where his sister was cooking.

"Sirius was right," he said without preamble. "They are looking for Harry. I got rid of him for now with a bunch of lies, but he will be back. I think he would hurt us to find out if we know where they have gone."

Catalina stared at him sorrowfully. "I will miss this house," she said.

"Do you care about the house, or about all our lives?" Miguel demanded. "If we don't leave now, harm will come to you and Richard, and I won't let that happen, you hear me? I swore you would be safe."

Catalina shot a frightened look at the doorway of Richard's room, where the dark-haired, pale-skinned toddler was taking his afternoon nap. She nodded, trembling on the verge of tears but too tough to let them spill out. She knew what she had to do to protect her brother and her son . . . and to protect the part of her family that was no longer with them.

"I will start packing."

Barty returned to the house that night intent on killing, and found it empty. He stood in the deserted kitchen and screamed with rage, not caring if he roused the neighbors, not caring if he had to blast his way out of the house with twenty casualties. They'd known. They knew where Sirius was. And he'd messed up his chance to learn it. He shuddered with rage and fear. The Dark Lord would be disappointed. He would be mostly highly disappointed with his servant.

But when he made the firecall and reported the information, his lord did not rage or lash out at him. He had learned patience, he informed Barty in his high, cold voice. He could wait until Barty had finished his work.

“But, my lord, I don’t know where to go,” he said in despair. Why, oh why, couldn’t he just come home?

“You have searched North and South America, have you not?” his master replied in a silky tone. “You must start on Europe, then.”

Harry woke up with a gasp of panic, and then forced himself to relax. Sunlight was streaming in past the curtains on his bedroom window, meaning he was safe in his bed in Brisbane, and most patently not crouching by Voldemort’s diminished body in some dank little room in England.

They’d been talking about the Tri-Wizard Tournament, he recalled. Voldemort and Pettigrew. Natural for him to have such a weird dream, he thought, since he knew that Pettigrew was a servant of Voldemort’s, and he’d just read a letter from Charlie Weasley about the tournament last night. Apparently the Hogwarts champion, a boy called Cedric Diggory, had won the second task, and was the favourite to win the whole thing. Voldemort and his servant were having a laugh about it, thinking how stupid it was that the wizards in the world were so worried about that when such a great threat was sitting right under their noses.

And then Barty Crouch had called. Harry had dreamed of him before, and he remembered that face when it appeared in the fireplace. He was looking for them still, in the dream. He’d been spitting with rage over having been foiled in his attempts to discover their location, and Harry’s emotions had battled between gratitude and pride towards Miguel and sharing Voldemort’s anger. He allowed himself a moment of sadness that Catalina and Miguel had been forced to leave the house, as it was very unlikely he would ever be able to locate them again. But he was worried by far more urgent matters. Crouch was getting closer, as Voldemort ordered him to begin searching Europe. It could only be a matter of time before he found them.

It was just a dream, Harry reminded himself. Just his own fears that such a thing could happen that were infecting his brain while he slept. But it felt so real. And he was not sure just how long he could keep convincing himself it was only dreams. Sooner or later, Sirius would catch on to why he wasn't sleeping. Sooner or later, the stress would catch up with him and he'd goof up while he was at work, and he'd be fired and Sirius would ask why. Eventually, the truth was going to come out.

And the truth was that Harry was afraid.

Book One: Becoming

Arc Three

To Come Home

It's all I wanted most

While it violently repulsed me

I fought a bitter war

To be drawn to this inevitably

Poised on a poisoned edge

While it falls from beneath me

Chaos stills a while

To beckon me enticingly

Love or hate or both

The desires are ever waiting

Watching through shadow

As I plunge still debating

I've been prepared

This moment always summoning

To return here now

To see what I'm becoming

“Asleep

Breakaway the voice is calling

Wake up you're asleep and falling

. . . It's not too late to find out who you are"

Falling Up, "Searchlights"

A/N: I got a few comments on this topic, so . . . Nobody has been looking for Sirius and Harry. Harry is assumed dead, and they are as sure as it's possible to be that Sirius is not in their country and therefore is outside their jurisdiction. Dumbledore and Remus are waiting for Sirius and Harry to come to them since the discovery of Peter's guilt. Crouch isn't amazing, just the only one making the attempt. It's taken him the better part of a year just to hit a dead end in Brazil.

Okay, moment over, and on to the story! Thank you for continuing to read this, and continuing to offer me your thoughts!

Chapter Twenty-One

"Hey!" he heard a shout from the front of the store. It sounded like Anna. "Hey, you haven't paid for that!"

He deliberately placed the book in its proper alphabetized location, left the cart where it sat between two rows of shelves, and walked to the end of the row to see what was happening. There was a young guy darting out the front door with a fat, expensive textbook under his arm, and Anna was hurrying from behind the cash registers to try to stop him. The alarm that tracked the books beeped loudly as the shoplifter went past it.

He broke into a run, moving much quicker than the thief. Anna stopped just shy of the door and stepped back to let him pass. While he ran to catch up, he deliberated. He didn't want to hurt the guy, because he'd get in trouble with the cops. He didn't even want to make a statement to the cops. His false identity, while it had passed the fairly lax background check the bookshop had done on him, would probably not stand up to police scrutiny.

So instead of catching up to the thief and trying to tackle him or some other immensely stupid move to make when you were going to land on pavement, he went wide around the building on the corner when the thief turned down the alley. He knew that the alley came out behind this building and they could meet up again. He put himself into a full sprint, figuring the shoplifter would slow down when he didn't see anybody behind him anymore.

He ran as fast as he could, wondering why in Merlin's name he was trying this hard. He came out in front of the shoplifter. The look of shock on the lanky man's face was priceless, but he didn't have time to enjoy it.

He swept his leg out in a high outward kick, knocking the book quite neatly from the young man's hand. He struck the man in the chest with his flat palm, sending him backwards into the wall of the building and making him whuff out a stunned breath without actually injuring him. He wouldn't have even bothered, but he wanted to be sure the guy left him alone long enough to pick the book up.

He did, and jogged back to the bookshop with only one look back to ensure he wasn't about to get jumped by the thief from behind. When he got there, Anna was standing out front, her blond hair being swept back and forth across her face by the wind of passing cars. The relief that stole over her face when she saw the book in his hand made the whole thing worthwhile. She was only nineteen, and she'd been promoted to assistant manager just last week. She couldn't afford to have a bunch of incidents happen now.

"He dropped this, but he got away," he panted, handing the thick and relatively unscathed book over to her. "Sorry I couldn't catch him."

"That's fine. Thank you so much, Evan." Her eyes were wide over the excitement. She simply stood there in the doorway, staring at him for a moment. He noticed for the first time that her eyes were actually a pale blue, not gray like he'd thought. Then she blushed and hurried back inside.

Harry calmly returned to stocking the books, partly amused and partly worried. Anna was blushing at him? Since when? They'd gotten along well since he'd started working here, but he hadn't thought she was interested in him. She was a curvy and suntanned blonde with a good job and a decent social life, she should be looking for someone to get serious about.

But why would she think he wasn't someone like that?, he reminded himself. Sometimes he forgot that here in Brisbane, Evan Rivers had just turned eighteen years old, not fourteen. Not to mention that he was a Muggle. Sirius had thought even sixteen would be pushing it, but Harry didn't want to be suspected of being a truant. So far, Sirius appeared to be wrong. People would skeptically ask him if he was really eighteen, but then they would accept his affirmative answer and get over it.

"Hey, Evan, will you come back to the office? I need you to sign an incident report about the shoplifter."

He followed Anna to the back, and she was all business, showing him what she'd written, making sure he agreed with it—he wasn't about to correct her and suggest she add in that he'd used martial arts on the guy and let him get off scot-free—and hardly even looked at him. He must have imagined the way she'd looked at him before, and he started feeling a lot better about the situation as he returned the cart of books to be put away. There would just be too many things wrong with Anna having a crush on him. He liked his life the way it was right now. No school, just his personal studies, a worry-free job, and time to himself to do what he liked.

Sirius disapproved. It was the only time they'd really disagreed on anything, so that made it weird. Sirius thought he should be in school, even if he didn't want to be in the same school Sirius was teaching at. Harry had spent only a few weeks there before he'd come to the conclusion that he didn't need it. Due to having been intensely focused for long periods of time on Astronomy, Defense, and Potions, he was far ahead of his classmates in those areas. Even Sirius admitted that he was close to NEWT level in those subjects already. His tutor in South Africa hadn't been the best, but Harry had already

had a firm grounding in the basics of Transfiguration and Charms from Sirius before that, and his studies on those subjects were fairly level with the classmates he would normally have. He thought Divination was rubbish and didn't care about it. Except lately. Lately, he'd been worrying . . .

He'd managed to keep Sirius from actively arguing with him about it, at least. He was reading several chapters a week out of a few different books on Charms and Transfiguration theories and applications, along with a few monthly publications on those subjects. He was working from a Potions textbook he'd gotten from the wizarding school on the outskirts of Sydney. It had levels above the school Sirius taught, so Harry had judged it to be sixth to seventh year coursework by Hogwarts standards. He'd definitely slacked off as far as Hogwarts curriculum would go, though, at least as Sirius remembered it. He knew nothing about magical creatures and what he knew about Herbology came from his Potions work. He basically only knew how to use the plants and animals, not how to keep them alive. Things like Arithmancy and Ancient Runes were well beyond him.

"Evan, come on, our shift's over."

Anna's voice startled him out of his thoughts. He glanced at his watch. It was indeed two a.m. and time for them to go. Harry considered himself quite lucky to have found an all-night place to work in that wasn't a convenience store. He was much more of a night person than a day person. He normally didn't wake up until noon, and then he spent some time after work either studying the stars or transforming and exploring the city as an owl for a few hours. When he didn't have to work, he sometimes drove out of the city and went flying on his broom for a while.

"Right, Anna, just one second."

He took his last book from the cart and put it on the shelf, then started taking the cart to the back room. Anna followed behind him, sighing impatiently.

“I want you to walk me to my car.”

“I will, right after I put this away.”

“You could leave it for somebody else.”

“Tsk. Tsk. And you a manager. I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.”

“Being a manager is overrated,” Anna said jokingly. “The pay raise doesn’t begin to cover the extra hassle.”

“Do you think Plotsky would give me your raise if I let him know he had such an unmotivated worker?”

Anna giggled, but didn’t come back with a return, so he stopped joking. At this time of night, after a full eight hours of her new position, she was probably exhausted.

When he turned around, she was only inches from him. He tried not to show how startled he was. She was smiling, but it was a strange, almost manic smile.

“Have I made fun of you for being short yet today?”

He scowled at her and the two inches of height she had on him. This was when actually being fourteen, not eighteen, started to matter. “Yes. Twice.”

“Poo, my quota’s full, then,” she said, giving him a false pout. Then her tongue flicked out and wet her protruding lower lip. “Hey, Evan?”

“Yeah?”

She hesitated. “Nothing.”

Then she stepped forward and kissed him. Shocked, his hands dangled limply at his sides and he simply stood there and was kissed. She stepped back, looking frightened.

“Oh, no. Don’t tell anyone, please. Plotsky would fire me on the spot. I’m so sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. I won’t. Tell anyone.” He was strangely inarticulate, at least for him. That was weird.

He was just as surprised as Anna was when he slid his hands around her arms and pulled her forward again so he could return the kiss. This one was much more pleasant, since they were both involved in it. Very enjoyable, actually. Harry had kissed a girl, once, in Austria. They were both thirteen, and right after the kiss she’d told him that she was the mayor’s daughter and he started avoiding her like she had the plague. Anna Kilgore, unlike that girl, knew what she was doing. And she was a totally sexy nineteen-year-old curvy blonde without any parents, much less parents that employed his godfather.

He released her and shook his head regretfully. “Someone might come back here. I’m sorry. We can’t do this. Come on, let me walk you to your car.”

She did. The whole time they were walking to the front door, Harry was afraid the other employees were going to sense what had taken place in the back room, and they’d both be fired. He would feel guilty as hell if it happened to Anna. She was trying to make something of herself, and it would be his fault if that got ruined because he couldn’t stop kissing her. He had no business kissing her anyway. It was not right to let her believe he was the right kind of guy for her.

“Here, I’ll get your door.” He fumbled open the door of the little beat-up station wagon she drove, the one he’d made fun of so many times because the hood was black and the rest of the car was blue, the one she’d sworn she would replace as soon as she had the money saved up. “Goodnight, Anna.”

“You could come home with me,” she said, instead of reiterating the farewell. “If you want.”

He opened his mouth, and then shut it again. He did want. Merlin, did he want. But it would really be a bad idea. An insanely bad idea.

Fourteen, you're fourteen years old, dammit. If she knew that, she'd be in her car and breaking all the traffic laws to get away from you. But for once, to wake up frightened and worried about what was happening to him, and able to feel someone lying next to him . . .

"I know I'm being really forward," she apologized, her face bright red and her eyes on the ground rather than on him. "I'm sorry for acting like such a hussy. It's just, I got this apartment with my boyfriend, and ever since he walked out on me, it's been so quiet there and I— Oh, god, I'm sorry, you don't need to hear any of this. I'll stop talking. Goodnight, Evan."

He had never seen her cry. Not when Plotsky yelled at her, not when she'd told him that her dad died of cancer last year, not when an old lady had a heart attack right there in the store and Anna had to perform CPR on her. Anna was really tough when she had to be. But she had tears in her eyes, either from embarrassment or from whatever pain was left over from what her asshole ex-boyfriend had put her through. He didn't even read her thoughts on purpose, just accidentally saw them as they were roiling so close to the surface and out of control. Her ex was a piece of shit, indeed, and she was desperately in need of a someone to help her put some of that behind her.

Oh, well, he thought, taking her in his arms and kissing her again. How old do you have to be to understand that?

Sirius shuffled in his favourite slippers (which had been a birthday gift from Catalina over three years ago and were falling part, hence the shuffle) to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee before he showered. He opened the kitchen window and admired the rising sun. Six o'clock in the morning was beautiful in Brisbane, if too damn early to be awake. He could have slept in a bit longer, but then he wouldn't have time to read the morning paper or eat his breakfast in peace before he went to work.

Shame he couldn't share it with Harry, he thought. He was starting to believe that this whole thing had been a huge mistake. Harry usually didn't come home until four in the morning or so, and then he was more often than not already at work by the time Sirius came home.

He'd wanted Harry to have the opportunity to be a normal boy for just a while longer, but Harry seemed to be using this time to grow up too fast instead. He'd argued with Sirius until Sirius gave in, just to shut him up, about the age they put on his Muggle identity. Sirius hadn't even wanted to get him one of those, as he wasn't keen to meet the criminal underworld here, but this was Harry's time, and Harry wanted to hang out with Muggles.

He might not agree, but he'd decided to hold his tongue as much as possible. Sirius could argue with him about it, or he could give the boy his chance to live his own life while he still could. Harry was still reading voraciously, and he was likely at least a year ahead of his peers if Sirius was being honest with himself, at least in most subjects, so he really didn't have a leg to stand on about Harry not being in school. But Harry had turned into a surly, moody teenager seemingly overnight, and Sirius found himself reacting by coming down on him in a way he never had when Harry had been younger. He knew he was getting them caught in a cycle. Harry wasn't used to Sirius setting rules or trying to tell him what was best for him, and he reacted by arguing and doing what he wanted despite the objections. Sirius responded to this attitude with yet more attempts to restrict, and so on. He didn't know what he was going to do about it, beyond keeping his mouth shut when he really wanted to open it.

It was at that point Harry walked through the back door, yawning, his hair even more unruly than usual.

"You're just getting home?" Sirius asked with wide eyes.

"Uh-huh," Harry said, sounding exhausted.

"I'm glad I thought you were in bed, I'd have been panicking."

"I'm fine, as you see."

"Where were you, anyway? Did you drive out of town to go flying?"

"No, I was just with one of my coworkers. Talking, mostly."

Sirius took a sip of his coffee, deliberated over whether or not this was a moment to keep his mouth shut, then he realized just exactly where Harry was getting home from. He nearly spat his coffee out.

“What’s her name?” he asked, hoping his voice was level.

“Who says it’s a girl?” Harry responded, pouring himself a cup of coffee. Why on earth he was drinking coffee when he was going straight to bed, Sirius couldn’t fathom.

He set his coffee cup down on the table, laid his hands out flat on top of his newspaper, and fixed Harry with a sharp look. “You had sex with her, didn’t you?”

Harry raised his eyebrows, looking at Sirius over his own cup as he took a sip. “Mmm,” he said, answering in the affirmative.

“Merlin, Harry, you’re—” He snapped his mouth shut.

“What?”

“Never mind. We’ll talk about it later, when you’re not so tired.”

“What’s to talk about?”

That flippant response dissolved his ability to hold back until Harry had slept. “The fact that you’re fourteen, by Iseult and good witches everywhere!” Sirius exploded, rising up out of his chair. “You are definitely not old enough to be getting yourself into relationships at this level, not to mention that you are lying about your age to do so! Do you know what James and Lily would say to me if they could see the way you’re behaving? Do you?”

“No!” Harry shouted back. “No, I don’t, because I never knew them, did I? You think I should just be like every other fourteen year old and be complaining about homework and having my biggest concern be whether or not I’m better at some sport than my friends are? Well, news report for you, Sirius! I’m not normal, and I’m never going to be! I’ve got to worry about whether the man who murdered my parents is

going to come after me! And you know what? If that's going to happen, I'd rather not die without some experience!"

Sirius was almost too angry to sort out words into their proper order. "So that's it, then? You've already decided how it's going to end? What happened to you? I thought you weren't going to let that prophecy dictate your life!" He really wasn't sure how this had stopped being about inappropriate sex and started being an argument about this, but he was suddenly frightened as much as angry. How could Harry think he was going to die? Sirius couldn't think about Harry dying. He just couldn't.

"It's not prophecy I'm worried about, it's Voldemort!" Harry shouted back. "He's such a fucking believer, and he'll kill me without even waiting to see if I am! He's the one running things!"

"Oh, so you don't believe in prophecy, but you'll let some creep with an idiotic set of values control you, instead? You'll let Voldemort decide how you live your life—or don't live it?"

"That's the problem, isn't it?" Harry nearly screamed. "Me not living! I've only got so much time before he comes after me, and I want to do things before then. Yes, I want to have sex! And I want to have a job! And I want to fly on my broom, and cook dinner, and drive to Sydney with my friends, and play stupid video games! I just . . . I don't want to die, okay?"

Then Harry did something extremely unexpected. He burst into sobs that so racked his body that he slumped to the floor, unable to stand up. Just like that, the argument was over and Sirius was looking at the frightened little boy he'd known five years ago. He knelt down on the floor beside the teenager and put his arms around him. His anger was gone. It had disappeared at the sight of his godson's tears.

"Shh, it's okay, Harry. It's all right."

Harry turned his face into Sirius and sobbed harder.

“Hey, calm down. You’re not going to die, Harry. You’re not. I’m right here, and everything is fine.”

“It’s not,” Harry choked out. “It’s not fine, Sirius. I’m having these dreams, except I don’t think they’re dreams at all. I think . . .” He took a deep, shuddering breath. “I think I’m seeing into Voldemort’s mind. I think the dreams I’ve been having are really happening. I tried to believe they weren’t, but I can’t anymore. Crouch is in France, and he’s way off our trail, but . . . how is it that I can see this? Why should I even be able to know that? I don’t understand this.”

Sirius, reeling from this blow, asked the only question that swam to the front of his mind. “Crouch? Who’s that?”

“Bartemius Crouch, Junior. I don’t know much, only what he told Voldemort that I overheard. His father had him Imperiused, but he threw it off and escaped, and Voldemort set him looking for us. He’s really lost us for now, but we can’t wait for him to find us. Voldemort . . . he wants me for something, Sirius. He wants me for some kind of ritual that will give him his body back. He needs the blood of his enemy.” Harry placed his hand over his forehead, covering the scar that was always concealed by makeup when he left the house. “I guess that’s me.”

“And you know all this because you’ve been dreaming about it?”

“Yeah. There’s some kind of connection. I know there is. It’s more than just dreams, I can feel things . . . I think I’m using Legilimency on him, but I don’t mean to. How can I do that without even casting the spell? I think maybe he’s the one sending projections toward me. I just don’t know.” Harry finally looked up at him, his eyes red and his face exhausted. “I don’t know what’s happening to me. I don’t know what to do.”

Sirius placed his hand, surprised by how steady he was, on Harry’s scar. “I don’t know anything for sure, but I’d be willing to be the answer is right here. Why didn’t you tell me? How long has this been going on?”

“I’ve been having the dreams almost since we moved here. I think it’s just that Voldemort’s getting stronger again. I didn’t feel anything at first, but now I know exactly how he feels.”

The confession seemed to be good, if draining, for Harry.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Sirius asked again.

Harry lowered his eyes, ashamed of his cowardice. “Because I like it here, with Anna, and my friends. I like just flying out in the desert and watching the stars. I’m not ready for this. I . . . We have to go back, don’t we?”

Sirius held him closer, grief and fear warring in him. “If we want answers, I think we do. There’s only two men I know of who could help us now, and one of them wants to kill you.”

“The other one?”

“Is currently the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” Sirius answered softly. “We have to go see Dumbledore.”

“We won’t need to take a lot of this with us,” Sirius said with some relief, surveying the boxes on his kitchen floor. “I know I’ve inherited my family’s home, so we won’t need to worry about furniture or anything.”

“We have to take it somewhere, though.”

“What do you mean?” Sirius asked, frowning at Harry, who was standing at the refrigerator looking for food. He’d been doing that a lot lately. Sirius knew that if he bothered to check, Harry would have grown a few inches since they’d moved here.

“We have to make it look like we’re just moving, not running away. It’ll help Crouch find us that much faster if it looks suspicious, and I for one don’t want him figuring out that we’ve come back to England.”

“Well, me, either,” Sirius admitted. “That’s why I gave two weeks’ notice instead of just up and leaving. You submitted a resignation at your job, right?”

“Yeah,” Harry said glumly, shutting the refrigerator door and swigging directly out of the carton of orange juice he’d grabbed. Sirius scowled. “It’s almost empty,” he protested, holding up the carton and sloshing the contents to prove it. “All the glasses are dirty, anyway.”

“Here,” Sirius said, tossing him a drinking glass out of an already packed box he’d dragged out of a rarely-used cupboard. He didn’t worry about whether or not Harry would catch it. The kid couldn’t drop something if he tried.

Harry just set the glass on the counter and carried the carton with him as he headed for the door, pulling his keys out of his pocket.

“I forgot, you said you were going somewhere tonight. What are you doing?”

"Nowhere," Harry muttered, starting to close the door.

Sirius snatched his wand from the kitchen counter and arrested the door, though he left Harry free.

"Tell me."

Harry gave him the evil eye, and he returned a hard glare. He might pretend to be an eighteen-year-old Muggle, but he was very much an adolescent wizard with a guardian who had the right to some respect. Harry sighed.

“Anna knows this couple that likes to 'experiment,' and she’s interested in doing something with them. I feel bad about having to tell her I’m leaving, so I’m humouring her. As far as I know, the plan is to get drunk, get naked, and see what happens. All four of us.” With that announcement, Harry finished off the juice and set the empty carton down on the counter as he exited the house.

Sirius gaped, his brain momentarily disabled. "Wait a second. Harry. Harry!" he shouted, standing up. Harry had already shut the door and gone. He stood there, dumbfounded. "No. He didn't just say that. Wake up, Padfoot, wake up."

The back door opened. Harry stood there with a perfectly straight face.

"You actually believed me, didn't you?"

Sirius blinked a few times, then launched himself at Harry with a roar. Harry found himself in a headlock, getting tickled in the ribs, both of them laughing like mad. He threw off the hold, a move which Sirius knew how to counter but didn't, since he was nearly crying with laughter.

"Thank . . . Merlin . . ." Sirius gasped. "I would have . . ."

"What would you have done, honestly?"

"Sent you off to your mother and father with my compliments," he growled goodnaturedly. He clutched a stitch in his side, trying to return to normal breathing. "Ow. I thought I was going to have a heart attack."

"That's what you get for believing me. I thought you learned your lesson when I came home and told you I wanted to start a band."

"I ought to have remembered your music classes," Sirius agreed. Harry had a really unfair ability to say anything with a straight face. Apparently it was all a matter of disciplining one's mind.

"Well, this was fun, but I really am going to take off for a while," Harry said, moving toward the door again.

"What are you really doing?"

Harry shrugged, giving him a helpless smile. "Saying goodbye to Anna."

Sirius gave him a disgusted face. "You've been with her for all of what, two weeks?"

"Yeah, but we've been flirting for six months. She deserves something from me, especially after I was fool enough to get involved when I knew what was coming and should have left her alone. I didn't say this was going to be an easy goodbye."

"Thank you for giving yourself that speech so I don't have to."

Harry flashed him an impatient look and headed back out. "Bye, Sirius."

"Home before dawn, and I mean that!" Sirius called back. He knew that Harry would obey, even if he wasn't thrilled by it. There had to be some kind of limit.

He turned back to the kitchen and eyed the mess with distaste. "I could just vanish it all," he muttered. Instead, he picked up the drinking glass from the counter where Harry had left it, and went to return it to its box. "Huh, we never unpacked these. This newspaper's got to be from last year . . ."

On a whim, he picked it up and scanned the page to see what was in it. The Daily Prophet classifieds from last summer, how funny. He read down the page, smiling when he realized he was browsing the ads for stuff that wasn't available anymore. Funny to think all the things listed had changed hands by now.

One caught his eyes.

"What?" he whispered.

Found: a pet garden rat, missing a toe on the front paw. For information, contact Moony in London.

Though what he saw stunned him, he had to laugh.

“This might be easier than I thought.”

Chapter Twenty Two

As soon as Sirius opened the front door, Harry knew he didn't much care for the house. It was dark, it was narrow, it was musty—it was not a new beginning. It was coming back to something just as dark and narrowly defined as the house, and when Sirius shut the door and turned to face him with a ragged smile, Harry felt a moment of panic. He nearly begged Sirius to leave the door open, but that was foolishness, and Harry was very rarely foolish (or at least so he hoped).

Sirius led the way down the hallway, but not far. He stopped and squinted his eyes into the murky interior.

"Lumos," he muttered, and by the light of his wand, directed Harry to light the candles on the walls. The candles were coated in dust, and there was a brief, disgusting smell of the thick layer burning off. Harry looked at the shrunken heads mounted on the walls. Flickering light played tricks, lengthening their noses then making them nearly disappear, or letting the empty eyes glance around. Harry shuddered.

"Those are the house-elves you told me about, I guess." Something about this place invited low voices and quiet footsteps. There were no ghosts that Harry could see, but it felt a little haunted all the same.

Sirius made a face. "Home sweet home."

"Yeah. Sweet."

"I told you I hated this place."

"We can make some improvements," Harry said without sarcasm (a rarity, but he was trying to be optimistic for Sirius' sake), looking into the corners and discerning cobwebs. "Obviously it'll be much better with more light and less dust, but some redecoration—" Here he nudged an umbrella stand made from a troll's leg —"is probably in order, too." He looked up at Sirius with real excitement in his expression. "Your parents probably kept loads of Dark artifacts

around here that I could study and we could destroy for practice. You think?"

"Oh, I'm sure there is," Sirius said in a distracted tone of voice. He was busy gazing up at some curtains, hanging closed over . . . what were they covering? "What is this, I don't remember this," he said to himself, and reached his hands up to draw them back. Then they flew open on their own, and a weird-looking woman with yellow skin and rolling, popping eyes started shrieking. They had both jumped backward and thrown up Shield Charms before the woman had her mouth fully open.

"Traitor!" she was screaming. "Filthy traitor to the most noble house of Black, how dare you return here with your bastard offspring—"

"Mother?" Sirius choked out. "What in . . ."

"It's just a portrait," Harry said, reaching forward and trying to yank the curtain back over it. Sirius hurried to help, and with each of them dragging on one side of the moth-eaten tatters of fabric, they managed to get it shut and shut her up.

"Well," Sirius said, heaving a sigh. "Mother, meet Harry Potter. Harry, that would be my mother."

"She's, uh, charming."

"She's going to be the first thing to go," Sirius said grimly. "Merlin, what a ruckus."

"What have you done to offend my poor mistress?" came a shallow, croaking voice from the top of the stairs. They both whirled, wands at the ready, yet again. But it was only an old and saggy house elf. Harry had never seen one before despite his familiarity with the concept, and he stared in fascination and disgust at the cloth sack that barely covered knobbly little limbs twisted by years of work.

"Kreacher, I had no idea you were still alive," Sirius said, almost sounding cheerful. "You've been here alone all this time?"

“I have been with my mistress, caring for the house, no one to help poor Kreacher—”

“Yes, definitely as useless as I remember,” Sirius cut him off. “Look at the state of this place! Well, clear off for now, we’re settling in. Go on, make yourself scarce.”

Kreacher looked offended, but turned and retreated stiff-legged to the interior of the upstairs. Harry had never really heard Sirius speak that way to anyone, and he wondered just what the history was between these two. It was obvious that house elves possessed intelligence of some kind, and so Harry felt certain Kreacher deserved some respect, but perhaps there was bad blood between them.

“I say we don’t bother unpacking until we clean it up a bit,” Harry said, eyeing the stairs and wondering just how safe they were.

“Let’s just dust off a bed for the night and we’ll start tomorrow,” Sirius said, agreeing with him.

“Oh, I might spell a nice clean space in the kitchen tonight to make some dinner,” Harry said, peering through the door to that room and making a face. It would require both wand and elbow grease, unless he was greatly mistaken. Cleaning charms weren’t really his area of expertise, although he and Sirius had gotten better at them after the tight ship Catalina had run and their occasional unwillingness to either get up and work or disappoint her entirely.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Sirius said, sounding very sober.

“Why? Where are you going?” Harry frowned.

“First things first. I’m going to see Dumbledore.”

“What, you mean now?”

“Yes. I’m not sure we’ll be able to keep our presence secret for long, anyway, and I want to talk to Dumbledore alone before he starts hearing rumours. I have a few things to say to him,” Sirius muttered at the end, not looking at Harry.

This was a blatant announcement that they would be discussing Harry’s dreams, but Harry didn’t argue. He stared into the dingy kitchen and chewed his lip, a habit he’d somehow picked up from watching Mona do it when he was nine and had never gotten rid of. Anna had thought it was cute. He was busy trying not to regret Anna. He shouldn’t have let himself get involved with her, he couldn’t help thinking. Now that he was a little ways removed from the situation, he was finding Sirius was right about so much of it. He was younger than he’d ever thought himself to be, and he’d become far too distant from the magical world. Now he was in it again, and he was feeling very lost and a lot more like a child than he had been.

Setting up the kitchen was probably the best thing for him to do, he realized. He could make this place feel a little bit like a home, like his home, and maybe then he wouldn’t feel so much like he was marching toward doom and destiny. It was still his choice, overall. He’d chosen to come here before Voldemort could force him to, and he was taking preemptive action by discovering what the dreams meant and how they were possible. It was all he could do. It had to be enough. He refused to allow himself to feel as though his life were out of his control now, just because they’d come here. It wasn’t true, and he wasn’t having much luck with emotions anyway. They’d made him fight with Sirius and start a relationship that may or may not have broken a girl’s heart, and they were trying to make him afraid and lonely. Well, he didn’t have to let that happen. He was a logical person and he’d deal with this situation logically. He’d clean up the kitchen and cook something so they could eat when Sirius got back without pointless worrying about things he couldn’t change.

Sirius’ hand fell on his shoulder. Harry wasn’t sure how long he’d been standing in the doorway of the kitchen, but he’d known, the way he always seemed to know, that Sirius was walking up behind him, so he didn’t get startled by it.

“I’ll try not to be gone long, but no promises. You remember everything I told you about the Knight Bus?”

Harry turned to Sirius. “Yeah, it’s simple. You gave me some wizarding money yesterday. I just have to pay them to take me to Hogsmeade and I won’t be able to miss Hogwarts from there, right?”

“Right,” Sirius said. “Personally, I’m going to Apparate. Much simpler.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Rub it in, why don’t you? When did you say I’m allowed to take the test?”

“Not till you’re of age.”

“That’s more than two years!”

“Get friendly with that bus driver,” Sirius snickered.

Harry elbowed him.

“Ow, okay, okay! I’m going to see about getting us connected to the Floo Network. That’s after I get an idea of the situation here and whether or not we can even let on we’re in the country.”

“All right. You care if I go to the market on the corner to pick up a couple of things to make dinner?”

“Go ahead, but be careful, please. Use makeup on the scar before you go out.”

“I always do,” Harry shrugged. “Speaking of disguises, depending on what you find out tonight from Dumbledore, you might need to dye your hair tomorrow.”

Sirius sighed. “Ugh.”

“Yep,” Harry agreed. Having done it regularly for three years did not make it any more fun, nor had slapping heavy-duty makeup on his forehead gotten any less aggravating. But they were at least used to it by now.

“Kreacher!” Sirius shouted. The elf appeared in the doorway within moments, making it obvious he’d been listening in. “I am your master now, and I have a command for you. You will tell no one we are here. You are not to leave this house until I return and give you permission, and even then, you may speak to no one about myself or about Harry, not at all, not unless I tell you that you can. You may not communicate our presence in this country to any person, in any way. Do you understand?”

Kreacher’s eyes were narrowed with malevolence, and anger. Harry was stunned. Did this mean that without the command, Kreacher would have? Who could he possibly have to tell?

“You will also assist Harry in any way he asks you to. He is your master just as much as I am, and you will obey him. Do you understand that?”

Kreacher nodded, glaring at Harry with those bulging, hateful eyes. Harry was deeply uncomfortable. He wished Sirius had left that part off. He didn’t want to be the house elf’s master, not a bit.

“Well, I’m going,” Sirius said with a shrug. “See you in a bit.”

Impulsively, Harry hugged him, squeezing hard. “Yeah, see you,” was all he said. Yet somehow he felt better. “Hey, wait,” he said suddenly.

Sirius turned. “Yeah?”

“What are you going to say to find him? Won’t you have to give a story to someone who will take you to him?”

Sirius smiled. “I’ll just tell them I’m seeking a teaching position if I even run into anybody, but I won’t need the help.” He winked. “I remember how to get to the headmaster’s office only too well.”

Sirius faced the gargoyle guarding the stairs and took a deep breath. He hadn't wanted to make his presence known, and he'd been prepared to sneak. It turned out to be unnecessary to worry so much, even though there were far more students--and adults--about the castle than he'd planned on. Tonight was the night of the third Tri-Wizard task, and while he had no idea who had won, he knew spirits were high. He'd glided through the celebrating crowd without drawing a moment's attention. He knew Dumbledore was in his office now because he'd seen the man parting the students and pushing through, for some reason uninterested in the festivities.

He'd followed the headmaster to his office and watched him go in. And now, he needed to send his Patronus upstairs to speak to Dumbledore and be given access to the office. It wasn't a matter of whether he could do it, or meeting resistance from the headmaster. The question was, did he want to come home? Was he ready to bring Harry here?

He'd always trusted Dumbledore. Without reservation. All through those early years of the war, when he was a boy little older than Harry was now. Dumbledore had seemed the wise old man even then, and more experience could only add to that presence. But so much had happened. Sirius had learned of so many mistakes that Dumbledore had made. Could he bring Harry back? Could he give up all they'd made together, as a family?

But that was pure selfishness, and he knew it. He was here for Harry, and Harry alone. Something awful was happening to his godson, connecting his mind to the mind of the man who had perpetrated all the evil that Sirius had seen in his youth. Harry was being hunted, and he couldn't keep going the way he was. He needed guidance. He needed stability. He needed a NEWT certification so he could get a job, for Merlin's sake. Sirius had to face the fact that despite having done his very best, he could no longer provide everything Harry needed. This, standing here, preparing to speak to the headmaster, this was what he could give his godson. This was the only he had left to give. A smooth transition and the greatest protection he could offer as Harry found himself in a new life, a different life.

So the silvery animal swept up the stairs.

“Headmaster?”

“Yes?”

Dumbledore was startled, that was certain. Someone who knew about communicating through a Patronus could only be a member of the Order, but it would have been a long time since he'd heard from Sirius.

“I'm at the gargoyle. May I come up?”

“Who . . . oh, I see. I've been waiting for this for quite some time now. Yes, please, by all means come up.”

Polite to the end. The gargoyle moved for him, and Sirius mounted the stairs with a feeling of unreality. This would be the moment for them to answer each other's questions. This might be the only time they'd have for it. Better make it count. But after the struggles of the last six years, Sirius wasn't feeling particularly respectful, charitable, or even in much of a mood to make this easy for anybody. He opened the door and strolled in with all the casualness he couldn't feel.

“I hear Frank and Alice's boy is a hero now. They must be proud.”

He sat across the desk from his boyhood hero and stared into shockingly blue eyes that revealed none of the anxiety that Sirius was feeling.

“You must have got the message in the newspaper,” Dumbledore returned, steepling his fingers and resting his arms on the desk. “I am happy to see you.”

He couldn't say the same, really, so he decided to skip the formalities and go straight to what he'd come for. First things first. “I can only assume from the secrecy that you and Remus are the only two who know about Peter. What happened? Why didn't it make the front page?”

Dumbledore took a deep breath, realizing that Sirius was in no mood to attempt pleasantries. "He attempted to kidnap Neville Longbottom. He believed that Voldemort would be pleased to receive the boy as a bribe to accept Mr. Pettigrew's return. Mr. Lupin was able to stop him, but unfortunately Pettigrew escaped him and returned to Voldemort alone."

"Peter got away? How did that happen? Why was Remus here at the school?"

"He served as professor for a year," Dumbledore answered, with a slight smile of some fond memory. "He did very well and managed to win the students' affection. Unfortunately, Mr. Pettigrew's plan was carried out on the night of the full moon, and I'm afraid Mr. Lupin was in no shape for heroism."

Sirius sat back in his chair and blew out a breath. "Remus transformed, Peter got away. What about the Longbottom boy?"

The headmaster briefly looked down at his desk, and when he looked up, there was pain in his eyes. "He has come to terms with his true identity in private. He has not revealed the truth to anyone. The general public still believes that he escaped an attack from Voldemort, just as Harry did."

"You did that," Sirius mused. "You knew about the prophecy, and you were setting Neville up to fill that role when the time came. You allowed Neville to believe it." Sirius thought about how it must have been, for a young boy, to hear from that traitorous rat that he was nothing and nobody, when he'd believed he was the future saviour of the world. And Dumbledore had chosen to put the boy through that. "How do you justify that?" he snapped.

Dumbledore's face was pale and strained--and strong. "After the events of the past six years, I find it difficult to believe I should explain myself to you." He smiled, making Sirius scowl. "But that is likely the arrogance of my old age influencing me. I recall that you have always been very curious and headstrong, and I have nothing to hide from

you. He was the only choice I had at that point. I sincerely believed that Harry Potter was dead at your hands, and that the prophecy must indeed be fulfilled. Neville was the only other boy who fit that description. Furthermore, my attempt to allow Harry to grow up as a normal boy only led to his death, and so with Neville I personally took charge to prevent another tragedy. Now I see that I was mistaken, that Harry is alive and must be the subject of that prophecy.”

He shook his head, his beard slowly wagging over his desk. Sirius tried to find it a pathetic sight, looking at a confused old man, but he couldn't see it that way no matter how he tried. The headmaster was burning with a strange passion, not wilting under the weight of his decisions. “I will tell you one thing about Neville Longbottom. He is a strong young man with a courageous heart that I can only aspire to. He has never wavered in his belief that any contribution he can make to defeating Voldemort is worth any cost to himself. If anyone could stop Voldemort through sheer determination, it would be that boy. If there was no prophecy and it could be any of us, it would be that boy. I have been devastated to see what Mr. Pettigrew's revelation has done to him.”

Sirius was surprised and deeply touched by that. Thinking of Harry, he knew what that spirit and struggle looked like. He felt very sorry for Neville Longbottom, and found himself wishing that Neville could be the boy of prophecy, and allow Harry his own life. It didn't seem fair, suddenly, to take that away from the Longbottom's boy.

“I see,” Sirius said softly. “I shouldn't have asked you to justify that to me. I know more than most that you always have your reasons, and they are usually good.”

Dumbledore chuckled at that. “What is that phrase about the best intentions?”

Sirius took a deep breath, and the thing on his mind made the irritation he'd come in with rise up again. “However, I do have another question, the answer to which is going to make up my mind about . . . about everything.” He leaned forward, his hands gripping his knees, looking his former mentor and leader directly in the eye. “I saw what was happening to Harry at that house. I saw them starve him,

imprison him, make a slave out of him. He had no connection to the magical world, and no idea of who he was. That was the house you put him in. Why?"

Dumbledore sighed. "I had no idea . . . I was forced to look more closely into that house when Harry disappeared, and I was appalled at the treatment he received."

"Appalled?" Sirius nearly shouted, starting to rise to his feet in anger. "That is my godson, and you were allowing him to be abused like he was a badly behaved pet!"

Dumbledore did not raise his voice in return, and did not rebuke him. For some reason, that made Sirius feel like his anger was unjustified. "I did not know. But had I known, would I have removed him? No, my dear boy, I doubt that I would have. I most certainly would have spoken to the Dursleys to request a kinder manner with him, but I would not have taken him away. That house was the only place he could be safe from Voldemort."

"What do you mean by that?" Sirius growled, sinking back into his chair.

"No matter what Petunia Dursley may have thought of her sister, they were related by blood. She and Harry had that connection. And Lily's sacrifice, the protection she placed on him by dying for him, was alive in that boy's aunt. So long as that house was his home, he remained under that protection. I would have left him there as long as I could, certainly. Neglect is not pleasant, but it is better than dying."

"Can I take him back there?" Sirius asked, alarmed. "Don't worry about speaking to them, I'll handle that."

"I'm afraid that protection is no longer available. It has been too long since he had a home there. No, taking him back would do nothing at this point."

Sirius dropped his head into his hand, closing his eyes. If he had known, if he had only known, what he was really taking Harry away

from . . . these nightmares would be meaningless. He would have been safe there. And in his rage at seeing the mistreatment in the home, and his overwhelming desire to redeem himself, he'd taken away the only completely trustworthy protection possible. It was him, not Dumbledore, that deserved his shouting and anger. Or was that true? How had this meeting gone so far from his expectations?

"We have no time for regrets, now, not either of us," Dumbledore said softly. His face looked less strained now, more compassionate. Sirius looked up at him, wondering what he meant. "We will have plenty of time for those when we are dead. We must now concern ourselves not with what could have been, but what we have now. And so I must ask: Is Harry with you? Is he safe?"

Sirius smiled wryly, oddly amused by the idea. "That's a loaded question."

Dumbledore, surprised by his answer, smiled back. "I suppose it is." His face was anxious. His fingers were no longer forming a steeple, but twined together.

"I left him at the house," Sirius finally answered. He'd thought he would enjoy holding the headmaster on the edge of his seat, but the words they'd exchanged had sucked such vindictiveness out of him. "You're the only one who knows we're here, other than my house elf, so he is safe enough."

Dumbledore seemed to deflate, for a moment. "That is good to hear," he said hoarsely. "I have worried for him since the moment I realized he was alive."

"He's fine," Sirius shrugged. "I mean, he's a teenager and he's crazy, but he's an intelligent kid. He, uh . . ." He shrugged again. How was he supposed to explain what Harry was like? "Well, Professor, he's the reason we're back. He'd started having some episodes, and we need help. You're the only person I thought would know what to do."

Sirius felt small and young again, looking at the headmaster suddenly in the way he had when he was a frightened sixteen-year-old. He was

admitting that he was lost and didn't know what to do, and he needed his teacher's help. It galled him, but he had to ignore it. It was something he had been trying to come to terms with for the last few weeks, since he'd realized what must be done.

Dumbledore gave him a worried look, but he rose to his feet without hurry. Sirius began to relax, just that quickly. He'd thought the man had made so many mistakes, but he had done everything he could. He'd done much more right than Sirius would have imagined. Having him in charge again was just the way things should be, the way they had been once upon a time.

"Let me have some tea brought up. I think we are in for a long talk, and I could do with the refreshment. I only hope the kitchen hasn't fallen prey to the madness of the rest of the school."

"I saw the celebration going on," Sirius said. "I wondered why you weren't with them down there. Did one of the other schools win?"

Dumbledore smiled, his eyes alight. "Cedric Diggory won the Cup, and I am enormously proud of him. But tonight is a night for the young people, so I thought I would leave them to it. Time enough later for the stuffy old man to offer his congratulations to a boy who won't even take it seriously."

Sirius looked at him soberly. "When I was seventeen, your good opinion meant the world to me."

Dumbledore smiled again, but it was sad. "When you were seventeen, the world was a different place."

"Not so different. It's all happening again just like it did then, and here we are right in the middle of it, as usual."

"I only hope that it will be a better world when Harry is seventeen."

"I don't think anything would make him happier than to help us bring that about," Sirius said quietly.

“I suppose I must ask another question, to better understand what is happening to Harry. It is now obvious that you know of the prophecy. I suppose the Potters told you. Have you told Harry?”

“I did,” Sirius sighed.

“Why?”

“He asked me to.”

“And you agreed?”

“I’ve never lied to him.”

“He must be a most unusual boy.”

“Oh, you have no idea.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

While Harry cleaned, he wished Sirius was here. It would make the job easier, true, to have a second wand with him. But Kreacher could help him, if it came to that. He didn't ask Kreacher to come down to the kitchen and help, though. Maybe he was just taking his cue from Sirius, but he was very uncomfortable around the elf. He did not like the idea of house elves at all, after seeing the way Kreacher was forced into subservience without even being allowed to voice his own opinion on the matter. He saw the need for what Sirius had done, of course, but he would much prefer being alone and having no servants (which was just how they'd always lived, though they'd never had such a big place) to forcing loyalty out of one.

So instead he cast his cleaning charms and wished he'd practiced them a little better. He was able to get rid of the dust, but the rust in the sink and the mildew at the bottom of the pantry were a little beyond him. He just wanted Sirius to hurry up and get back. It wasn't about dinner, he could whip something up whenever--or keep it warm for ages if necessary—but simply about being alone in this house. They were back in England, and Harry couldn't stop feeling nervous. He wished he'd gone to the school with Sirius. He knew Sirius had been afraid of their reception, but after seeing how much Remus Lupin, at least, wanted to reconnect, Harry wasn't afraid. He just didn't like the idea of them being separated so quickly.

The rat raised its nose and sniffed, the little pink nub twitching fitfully. The filthy fur gleamed sleekly with wet from the sprinklers in the park across the way. It had been his duty to watch this house and report anything unusual, and he'd been doing so since he'd escaped a year ago. He'd grumbled about the futility of it--to himself, he'd never grumble in front of his master—but he'd done it, and now it had finally paid off. The rat slowly bulged and burgeoned upward and outward into a scruffy man with cruel eyes, eyes that watched the light in the window that only a select group of people in this world knew existed. Two people had entered this house not long ago. And since he'd been crouched by the door, amplified the sound inside, and heard Sirius Black leaving to go to Hogwarts, he knew there was only one person left.

“Three guesses who,” he muttered, and brushed off his clothing. He had his story all ready, an alias and everything. He could hope the boy was stupid, but that wasn’t likely. Born of a man like James and raised by a man like Sirius, the boy was probably smart. He could overcome that. He was really the only choice at this point, what with Crouch still wasting his time in Italy.

He was really only hoping Harry was still in the house. He'd been gone for an hour, to report their return to his master and revel in the fact that he'd completed Crouch's task for him. He and the Dark Lord had wasted no time, and Peter had returned to the house to retrieve the Potter boy as quickly as possible. Everything was ready. The ceremony was prepared for, and he'd left his master there at the graveyard awaiting him. Awaiting him and one other. He shuddered, remembering the way his master had clutched at his shirt with his skeletal hand, those fierce red eyes burning into him.

“You will bring me the boy, Wormtail, or you will not see sunrise.”

There was no doubt that what the Dark Lord said, he meant. He would perform the curse himself, or if he wasn’t feeling up to it after having to be moved to the graveyard, he'd have Nagini do it. Peter never considered simply not returning. It wasn’t that easy. Not only that Crouch would find him and kill him on their master’s orders, that preening little git, but that Peter had no place to go, anyway. No other place to go but back to his master. And to do that, he had to have the boy.

He knocked.

Harry heard the knock at the door in front. He had given up on cleaning and was preparing to use his Muggle money to go to the corner store and pick up some simple things to eat. He frowned, shoved the money he'd been counting back in his pocket, and drew his wand. There were only two reasons someone would be knocking at the door. Either Sirius’ talk with Dumbledore had taken an unexpected turn and he'd sent someone else to fetch Harry, or their presence here had not gone unnoticed as they'd hoped.

He didn't like either option, so he kept his wand trained on the door and tried to feel grateful that Kreacher was here to open it. He most sincerely did not like the fact that he did not know who their allies were in England, and who were their enemies.

And tonight, luck was favouring the wrong side, for Peter Pettigrew had unwittingly picked out the one name that Harry would consider trusting.

"Ah, hello, is Harry here?"

Kreacher, knowing this was beyond the bounds of his mandated ability to speak, simply stared at the visitor with huge, luminous eyes.

"Er, I hope so, I've been sent from the school for him," the man said, clearly expecting Kreacher to speak up if he was more friendly.

Harry stepped forward from the kitchen doorway to come down the hall and confront his visitor. He made no effort to hide the wand.

"Oh, you won't need that," the man laughed nervously. He was clutching a cap in his hands, and his clothes were very shabby. He was small and sort of fat, but that was all that Harry could make out with him standing in the dark outside. "I've just been at the school, and they asked me to come pick you up."

"Why?"

"Oh, Si—Mr. Black, that is, Mr. Black, he's all cloistered up with the headmaster and they're busy planning your future, so they asked me to come to the house and pick you up and bring you where you'd be safe."

"And who are you?" Harry shot back. He thought he knew, now. He recognized that voice. But he had to be sure.

"My name is Arthur Weasley," he said, and put on a self-deprecating smile. "I'm nobody important, certainly, but my children attend

Hogwarts and I happened to be at the school tonight. Dumbledore trusts me, so they thought it would be all right for me to collect you.”

Harry, positive now but needing a better advantage, lowered his wand without putting it away. “You can step inside.”

“Oh, not necessary,” the man said, still sounding extraordinarily nervous. “We’d better get going as quickly as possible, they are expecting you after all.”

The alarm signals in his head went off, big time. There was no reason for him to refuse to come inside, and so Harry knew he was right. “I thought they just wanted me brought there safe. Do they want to talk to me?”

“Didn’t tell me that,” he laughed, “I’m not privy to what they’re talking about, I just know they want you there right away.”

Harry almost laughed at this pathetic explanation. Sirius knew better. He would know that Harry would not come with anyone but himself, and he would not be “making plans for his future” without him. That simply wasn’t the way they worked, and obviously this man didn’t know that, but Harry did. Nor did he believe for a moment that a man as canny as Dumbledore would place his trust in a man he didn’t even confide in. But it was the voice that had caught his attention, whether Harry could make out his features in the dusk or not. The man standing on the front stoop was a man he’d dreamed about, many times. The servant called Wormtail. Peter Pettigrew. The man who’d really gotten his parents killed.

Harry’s fingers tightened on his wand, and he wondered how to proceed. He felt certain that he could bind this man with a spell, catch the Knight Bus, and report this intrusion. He simply needed a moment to judge his opponent. He knew for sure that there was a wand concealed beneath that cap in his hands, so he wasn’t defenseless and he could retaliate.

He considered luring his unwanted guest into the house and simply throwing him down and pinning him. He likely wouldn’t be expecting

that. Actually, the more he thought about it, the more he felt sure it would work. Pettigrew was certainly not trained in physical defense, and there would be time enough to use the a binding spell on him when he was already on the ground and unable to shield himself.

“Come on in, then,” Harry said, his voice light. “I just have to run upstairs and get something. I’ll be right down.”

He ran up the stairs, ducked into one of the rooms he hadn’t even seen yet, and waited for footsteps to tell him Pettigrew was in the hallway, feeling triumphant. Then he came back down, a broad grin on his face, and approached the man, patting him on the shoulder despite the deep loathing he felt at even having to touch him.

“Okay, let’s go. You know, I’ve heard of you before, well, mostly your kids, but . . .” In the midst of talking, Harry grabbed Pettigrew’s arm, threw him over his shoulder, and landed atop him on the creaking dirty floorboards. The man shrieked in surprise, nearly squealed, until his breath left him in a whuff as they hit the floor.

“Incarcerous!” Harry shouted, even as he saw the Pettigrew’s hands thrusting up toward him.

Something was hidden behind that cap. Harry didn’t think about it, just knew he’d rather not get slammed in the face by it, and he grabbed it with his hands.

There was the weirdest sensation, like a hook had caught just in his stomach and yanked him forward, and the sight of the stranger being bound by conjured ropes was lost in a rush of sensation and sudden darkness. Harry, for the first time in his life, was leaving his home without a clue where he was going.

Harry came to with a gasp of shock and shoved himself up from the ground. He felt cool grass beneath his hands and moonlight glinted off his glasses, which were hanging badly askew. He adjusted them with one hand and held his wand in the other. He knew someone was nearby but not very close to him, but still, it took a moment for his instincts to adjust. He was now dealing not with Muggles in a dojo,

but with wizards who could attack from any distance. He wasted time finding a stance for a physical defense when he should have been raising a Shield Charm or at the very least, dodging.

“Expelliarmus!”

Harry’s wand flew from his hand and skittered through the air into the waiting hand of—

“You,” Harry breathed.

“Me,” the man chuckled, wagging Harry’s wand with glee. His peaky face was alight with humour and confidence. “Imagine my amusement to be called away from searching in Italy to find out that you were already here.”

“You’re real,” Harry whispered.

The man bowed, crisp and formal. “Bartemius Crouch, Jr., at your service. Or, rather, at his.” At this, Crouch pivoted smartly and directed his bow to a dark bundle laying in the grass. Harry saw the bundle move and knew with horror what was in it.

“Oh, shit,” he muttered, scuttling back a little bit in the cool, damp grass on his butt and pushing with his feet. He knew that getting a few inches further away wouldn’t help, but he had to do something.

“We do not appreciate that kind of coarse Muggle language here, boy,” a tinny voice rasped. “Such a foul mouth for such a young boy.”

It was on the tip of Harry’s tongue to tell the twitchy bundle of dark cloth to go fuck itself, but he didn’t have the chance.

“Shall I clean it for you, my lord?” Crouch asked, grinning, and pointed Harry’s own wand at him. “Scourgify!”

Harry choked on the bitter taste of soap in his mouth, gagging and coughing out a particularly bubbly and foamy glob of spit.

“Clever, Crouch,” he hissed when he could speak. “I like your variation on the spell. You have a talented servant, there, Lord of Evil and Darkness or whatever they’re calling you now.”

“You shall see what they call me shortly,” the cold voice said calmly. “Soon you shall see them bow to me as they once did.”

“Wouldn’t that be a treat for me,” Harry grunted, finally standing up. “Unfortunately, I have to be going now.” He shrugged and spread his hands helpless, ready to turn and try to escape. “I left a little bit of a mess at the house that I ought to get cleaned up—”

“You’re not going anywhere.”

And then Harry found himself sailing through the air and crashing heavily into . . . what had he crashed into? His head hit hard, and he had to wait until he stopped seeing spots in his vision to notice where he was, for the first time. In a graveyard. Thrown up against a tombstone and being lashed to it.

“A graveyard, huh? Planned ahead, didn’t you? But where’s the shovel?”

“There will be no need for a shovel. We will leave your body to be found, so there can be no mistaking where you have gone this time.”

Harry was realizing now that there was very little he could do. He was bound up, in a graveyard, with an enemy who hated him and planned to kill him and that enemy’s servant held his only weapon. His breathing accelerated until he felt like he wasn’t getting any air no matter how he tried. His chest was expanding against the restraints so hard it hurt. His head started to swim.

Easy, Harry, he thought to himself. Think. Your wand isn’t your only weapon. A wand is nothing without a wizard, and you are still a wizard. You have a mind. Use it.

“Well, best kill me and get it over with, then,” Harry said, hoping he sounded more glib than breathless. “Wouldn’t want to keep you from any urgent appointments.”

It was even worse when the thing in the bundle laughed. Such awful, cold laughter. “After tonight, the world will be waiting for me.”

Harry didn’t know what that meant. He didn’t want to know. “The world might wait, but I’ve got places to be, so if you’d just—”

“Silencio,” Crouch said, sounding almost casual. He was using his own wand, now, at least he’d put Harry’s away. Harry couldn’t stand the idea of the man fouling his wand with spells meant to harm. That wasn’t what magic was for. But then Crouch approached him, strolling forward with a relaxed, arrogant stride, and Harry could do nothing but glare at him.

“I have waited long enough, my servant,” came Voldemort’s voice. “Begin the ceremony now.”

Crouch immediately picked up his stride, his face getting pale. Harry tried not to smile at how easily reprimanded he was, or how he looked like a little boy after a scolding. After all, the creepy figure in his dark wrapping was cause for him to fear, too. And what was this ceremony, anyway? What was going to happen? He needed to get free, now. He looked around. What were his options? What were his weapons?

Voldemort. Crouch. A large cauldron sitting near the tombstone to which he was bound. And on the grass, half-hidden and half-forgotten, the frayed brown cap Harry had grabbed when Pettigrew had thrown it in his face. A Portkey. That was his only chance. But he didn’t know how to get to it. He’d have to get free before they killed him. They were only waiting for the right moment in the ceremony to do that, and he could only hope that he had to be released and have free movement to uphold some arcane rule. If they could kill him while he was like this, he had no chance. None at all. He could barely breathe, let alone defend himself.

Keep cool. Just breathe. Think. You're not . . . not going to die. Not yet.

And the ceremony began. Flames sprang to life beneath the cauldron. Harry was introduced to the purpose of the graveyard in this ceremony, despite being unable to hear much of anything with the way his pulse was pounding in his ears, when a bone rose up just beside him. He watched it float, watched it added to the cauldron. He breathed in a ragged gasp. Blood magic. That's what this was. Blood magic.

And suddenly he had hope. They couldn't kill him just yet. They needed him alive. He still had a chance, however brief. Maybe they did have to release him for some reason. He had a part to play, not just a life to give.

Crouch approached him. The arrogance had gone from his face, which was pale and sharp with anxiety. His eyes burned fever-bright with madness, the madness that had been developing through years of captivity and then the frustrating disappointment of his futile search for his quarry abroad. He was utterly devoted to the child-like figure on the ground, who was issuing orders in that hateful voice, and the passion showed in his crazed eyes. He hadn't been the one to be coached on these proceedings, but he was the only one available and so he had to follow his master's instructions perfectly. He approached Harry with a knife.

Harry's mouth went dry. Crouch would cut his throat now. He was going to die. He tried to get his mind around that. The only thing he could think was, I remembered to hug Sirius before he left. He knows I love him. That calmed him somewhat. He hadn't gotten to do everything he'd ever wanted yet. But he'd done many things, and when he'd been taken from his home tonight, he'd gone with the knowledge that his godfather loved him and understood Harry's love for him. That was all he really needed to know. He wished he had more opportunity to fight Voldemort, it rankled him that he was giving Voldemort what he wanted without a fight, but he could face this with some dignity.

Crouch raised the knife, saw the peace in the boy's eyes, and lashed out in rage at such an attitude, striking harder than he'd been asked to. The knife landed on Harry's arm, Harry heard Crouch reciting the phrase, which reverberated in his head, blood of the enemy, blood of the enemy, blood of the enemy, as Crouch retreated again with dark red oozing from the silver blade. It took a moment for Harry to realize he was in pain, and saw how deeply Crouch had cut him. They wanted his living blood, he realized foggily.

"Ah, ah, ah," he gasped, trying to breathe when he turned his head and saw his immobilized arm cut open to the bone. "Oh, ow . . ."

He turned sickly to watch Crouch take the knife and raise it over himself.

"Flesh of the servant . . ."

It echoed. Flesh of the servant. Flesh of the servant. Harry knew he was in serious medical trouble right now, from shock if nothing else. He was cold everywhere, shaking, and the blood dripping down the tombstone from his arm was thick and dark. The way his ears were starting to process sound incorrectly was certainly not a good sign.

"God, who are you people?" Harry sobbed in pain as Crouch's hand splashed into the cauldron, nearly red-hot from the roaring flames beneath it. Crouch screamed in agony, but Harry was too busy with his own pain to feel sympathy. When the bleeding Crouch dropped the dark bundle of Voldemort into the cauldron, Harry felt a wild moment of hope that he'd gone so mad in his pain that he was trying to drown his master.

But no. The hissing flames, the boiling cauldron, the black smoke . . . out of it all, something even darker and more terrible rose. A figure. A large one. It melted and molded, and then a man stood there. Harry gazed dully at the snake-like face, knowing what had been borne. Voldemort had resurrected his old body. He'd used Harry to do it.

Where is his nose? Harry shuddered in revulsion. Voldemort turned, his movements smooth and supple as a snake, and fixed terrible red

eyes on Harry. Harry froze to complete stillness. His trembling, the gasping—it ceased under that gaze. Voldemort chuckled, watching Harry's fright and pain. It became laughter, high, peeling laughter of joy and celebration. He reveled in seeing Harry this way. And Harry did not like to be laughed at.

“You’ve had your fun, now let me down.”

Voldemort stopped laughing, the slits of his nostrils flaring with indignation. His red eyes flashed with rage. “You will learn respect!” he shouted, and whirled to Crouch in a fury. Crouch was holding up a wand—Voldemort’s wand, Harry realized. One he’d been too weak to use all this time, but now . . .

“Crucio!” he shouted.

Waves of pain rushed through Harry, like fire under his skin, in his veins, burning him alive. He screamed. He didn’t want to, but he couldn’t help it. He screamed in a desperate desire to find some strength left as the pain of that curse devoured and consumed the pain in his arm and made it meaningless. Then it stopped. Harry gagged on another scream, tried to stop. He shivered uncontrollably. He gasped, tried to swallow, winced at what the screams had done to his throat.

“Perhaps you have learned your lesson,” Voldemort said, his eyes alight with amusement and entertainment. He waved his arm, and Harry collapsed to the ground. Free at last, but unable to move. “You see, Barty? He is bowing to me. Perhaps he would like to join me after all.”

Harry couldn’t allow that. No matter how it hurt and how weak he felt, he would not let that stand. He dragged himself to his feet, shaking with cold as the dew on the grass soaked into his clothes and blood continued to ooze from his arm.

“You haven’t proved anything but how much pain you can cause me,” Harry grated out of his raw throat. “While I was helpless and couldn’t defend myself. I have no desire to join you. None.”

He'd judged Voldemort's arrogance correctly. He couldn't live with Harry believing he was a coward or weakling, even when he was the one in a position of power and Harry was next to defenseless. He ought to know better than to listen to the desperate insults of a broken enemy, but Harry had learned plenty from his dreams over the last year. He knew that Voldemort couldn't ignore that.

"Give him his wand, Barty."

"My lord, shouldn't you call the others—"

"The wand! Let him face me on even ground and we will see what happens!"

Crouch held out his one remaining hand with Harry's wand held loosely in it. He hunched over his bleeding stump in pain, and Voldemort snatched the wand from him in disgust. He held it out to Harry. Harry stared at the wand. Sirius had bought it for him on his eleventh birthday, in Rio. That had been a good day. And now Voldemort held it out to him as though a gift in his powerful benevolence. It filled Harry with anger, brought on new energy, and flooded him with the ability to fight back. He stared at his wand, which he'd grown very fond of over the last few years. He could take it, and use it to duel with Voldemort. But he couldn't win. Not against this man, not with his level of experience. He had no chance.

But who said he had to play by the rules? He might be a kid, but he wasn't stupid.

"Ahhhhh!" Harry cried as he sprang forward and delivered the most powerful and perfectly aimed kick of his life. He wished Miguel could have seen it. His foot landed squarely in the middle of Voldemort's chest and knocked the man sprawling on the ground, glancing off a headstone. He tried to retain his grip on Harry's wand, but he lost it when his hand struck the stone. It snapped from the force of the fall, and though held together by its center, two pieces bounced into the grass. Harry snatched it, and screamed, tearing his throat even more, "Accio cap!"

The Portkey wiggled, but his broken wand was next to useless. He dove toward the cap just as Voldemort and Crouch both pointed their wands and shouted “Avada Kedavra!”

He ducked, rolled, and his hand fell on the cap just as a jet of green light flew over his head. He felt a sharp tug, and the graveyard dissolved around him.

“Argh!” Peter cried when the bloody, muddy, grass-stained boy landed on the floor of the hallway where he’d left him.

Kreacher, who had been reaching into Peter’s back pocket to get his wand for him, froze.

Harry lifted his face, streaked with blood, dirt, and tears, from the musty hallway carpet. He saw the two there, and his face converted from terror to sheer rage. He leaped up and threw himself onto Peter, hands clutching his throat, screaming,

“You serve that thing? You gave up my parents, my parents, to that?”

Peter choked, gagged, tried to plead for his life. Harry was caught in the grip of so much anger and fear that the boy hardly noticed his protests, but after a moment, he released Peter’s throat on his own.

“You’re going to jail,” he spat. “You are going to get what you tried to foist off on Sirius, and I hope you rot there. But I won’t kill you. I don’t kill people.” Harry turned on Kreacher, who took a step back. “And you will stay here and watch him while I get Sirius. If he tries to escape, you will try to stop him, and you will inform me immediately. I saw you trying to help him, so don’t give me that hurt look like you deserve my pity. You have a mind to choose for yourself whose side you’re on, and you picked wrong. Both of you, stay here until I get back.”

Then the boy staggered to his feet and walked out the front door, slamming it behind him. Peter gasped for breath, and felt a thrill run

through him. The blood all over him . . . his arm was badly injured. The ceremony. Had it been completed?

The old mark on his arm flared into life. He grinned. Oh, yes. It had been completed.

Chapter Twenty-Four

He tried to breathe. He tried to stay standing. He tried not to be frightened, or weak.

Don't pass out. Don't pass out. Just get to Sirius. Sirius . . .

Harry held his broken wand and stared at it in befuddlement. It was snapped in two, the hair of the lara in the center glinting golden in the light of the dingy streetlamp above him. He had always known that a wand of Brazilian make, containing the magical power of a Brazilian siren, was not a perfect match for him, but it had served him well. He felt a sense of loss at having this happen, but it was hard to sort out if it was the wand, or something greater that he'd lost. His brain was incapable of its normal processes. He felt as if he were drunk or something, unable to make the proper connections. He knew that his wand was broken and he was sad about it, he knew he needed to find Sirius immediately, he knew he'd left a man tied up in his house and another man sprawled in the grass trying to kill him. None of it made sense, together or apart.

I want to sleep now, he thought past the haze that had settled over his brain and before his eyes. Just for moment or two . . .

When he felt his butt hit the concrete of the step outside the front door of the house, he was alarmed at his sudden apathy. He had a serious head injury, and he absolutely could not allow himself to fall asleep.

Get up, come on, please get up.

With awful effort, he got himself on his feet again. His arm released a fresh flow of blood, and the pain shot past the fog in his brain and gave him a moment of clarity.

"Put your wand out," he muttered, and did.

A triple-decker, ridiculously purple bus nearly ran him over. He swayed on his feet as its brakes hissed and it stopped in front of him, sending fresh spikes through his skull. His nose was inches from the

greasy purple paint, and he had to force himself to step back as the door to the bus opened and somebody stepped out. His body was slow and cumbersome, and he didn't like it. He needed his body to cooperate just a little longer.

"Just a little longer, please," he said aloud.

"—your conductor—eh? What? You say something?"

"No," Harry said, forcing himself to focus. "What did you say your name was?"

"Stan Shunpike. 'Ere, what's happened? You're bleeding, you are."

"It's nothing," Harry muttered. "I need to go to Hogsmeade."

"Where you need to go is St. Mungo's," the scrawny, pimply-faced youth (little older than he was, unless his vision was starting be affected) said importantly, but Harry was in no mood for this. He didn't have the time to waste on Stan Shunpike and what he thought of Harry's health. He didn't know what St. Mungo's was, and he didn't care.

Just get to Sirius. Don't pass out yet.

He stepped past the conductor and onto the bus. "Does this bus go to Hogsmeade?" he asked the driver with a frown to discourage any comments on the state of him or his clothing. The driver, a man with thick glasses and a horrified expression, just nodded.

"Any particular building, sir?" he asked in a quavering voice.

"No," Harry croaked. His throat couldn't take much more talking.

"All right, then," said Stan Shunpike, taking charge again, as well as Harry's elbow. "You'll sit down 'ere, and that'll be 13 Sickles from London all the way up to Hogsmeade, 'less you'd care for hot

chocolate, which makes 15 Sickles, 'less you'd care for a hot water bottle and a toothbrush, which will be 17 Sickles."

Harry was amused that despite the way he'd managed to intimidate the driver, Stan was more than willing to approach him and collect his fare. He dug into his pocket and gave Stan whatever was in there, hoping it was enough. Stan immediately started counting under his breath.

" . . . fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. Hey, you've gone and gave me one too many or one too few, dependin'."

Harry held out his hand and wearily took one Sickle back. His arm hurt too badly to maneuver for his pocket again, and he let it sit there in the palm of his hand. He clenched his hand over it, determined to direct his mind and have something to focus on for the duration of the trip.

"Thank you, sir. 'Choo say your name was?"

"Didn't," Harry grunted. "It's Evan."

Stan stood there and looked at him, his fist closed over fifteen Sickles.

"Evan Rivers. My father's interviewing for the new position at Hogwarts," he added with a burst of all the cleverness he could muster. "I'm supposed to meet up with him in Hogsmeade to see how it went." He could only hope that there was a new position at Hogwarts, or that Stan wouldn't realize there wasn't.

"Oh," Stan said, nodding knowingly. Harry almost summoned up the wherewithal to laugh, since it appeared there was an opening at the school after all. "Well, good luck, eh?" He turned to the driver. "Right, then, Ernie, let's stop off at Hogsmeade after Brighton. Evan's got to see did his dad get the job!"

Harry made himself stay seated upright on the edge of the bed to which Stan had led him. He could not lie down; he knew that would be a mistake. There was a wizard in stocking feet—mismatched

stockings, for that matter—sleeping two beds over, but other than that, the bus appeared to be empty on this level. He heard chattering up above him, and figured there must be other passengers up there. The light of the candles mounted on the walls of the bus were misty and indistinct to his eyes, and he shook his head, trying to clear it. He hid his wand away in his pocket so no one could see it was broken, and rested his forehead in his hand, worried that even his professional-grade concealer had worn off after the night he'd had.

He was thrown back when the bus took off with a bang, and he bit his tongue to avoid screaming with pain. He tasted blood in his mouth and nearly screamed anyway at his own stupidity. He ought to have just let it out, if all he could do was injure himself further. Just when he pulled himself back up, Stan appeared at his elbow with the cup of hot chocolate he'd apparently paid for. Harry nearly threw it back at him, but the steam rising from it was intoxicating in his frozen state, and he wrapped his hands around it eagerly. The warmth made him groan, and he nearly buried his face in it when he drank. The heat felt good all the way down, and the sensation of comfort was enough for him to think that he'd better finish it and utilize the sugar rush to keep going.

Another bang, for which he was better prepared, and then they were speeding down a quiet street. When the door opened and a passenger descended from above, Harry smelled the saltiness of the sea in the air. This must be Brighton. Next stop was his, and he could just about kiss Stan Shunpike, blemishes and all. He was going to make it after all. He'd come very close to passing out barely out the door of the house, but now he thought he'd make it.

The bus banged once more, Harry jumped to his feet, nearly threw the empty mug coated in chocolate residue into Stan's face in his rush, and clambered off the bus. The night air caressed his face, and he nearly cried at how nice it felt. The town was well-lit, which was hard to miss since each light was a separate dagger into his eyes. He was standing at the door of a tavern of some kind, which was overflowing with patrons, all of whom were shouting and toasting for some reason. He'd missed a holiday, he thought. Maybe it was an English wizarding holiday that he was unfamiliar with. That didn't

matter right now. The only thing that mattered was getting to the school.

He turned, and saw it. Even in the dark, it rose up striking against the velvet sky studded with stars. Huge. Gorgeous. Each description he could think of was a separate impression, and Harry found the castle overwhelming. Yet it made his heart sink to see it, because it was obviously about a mile away. Walking would take forever in this state, fifteen or twenty minutes, as a trudge was about the only gait he could manage. Maybe there was someone in this town who could go up to the school . . . but, no. He couldn't talk to anyone about this. He couldn't involve anyone. He, personally, needed to make it up there.

Walk at least fifteen minutes and hope he didn't pass out on the way, or . . . the sugar from the chocolate was hitting his bloodstream. It wouldn't last long. One quick burst of energy, and he'd be there so quickly. He could do it. He just had to focus. It occurred to him to wonder why he hadn't done this to get away from Voldemort, then realised that he would have only been more vulnerable if he had.

He dragged himself to the side of the tavern, hiding himself in the shadows, and transformed as quickly as possible. Nobody saw the strange, bleeding boy become an owl, but several saw the large bird's takeoff. His claws clutching the dirt, he hopped a few paces away from the wall and bounced before leaping up into the air. His wings caught the warm summer wind created by the lake, and he soared over the road, flapping his wings madly despite the pain he felt and hurrying to get to the school as quickly as possible. His sharp owl's eyes saw the forest, the lake, the students walking in groups into the castle away from some kind of hedge maze beside the school.

A loss of height. The realization that he was descending came to him suddenly, since he'd made no decision to come down yet. He'd been planning to alight on one of the towers and come down into the school, but his wings would no longer hold him and he was falling—too rapidly. He tried to beat his wings and slow his progress, but the pain was too sharp, and he saw that he would crash. He did the only thing he could do—aimed himself at the soft grass near the entrance, where there was no crowd of people, prepared all his mental faculties, and did one of the craziest things he had ever done. He transformed.

Still falling, but he timed it as best he could, and went from owl to adolescent about five feet from the ground. When he landed, he lost his breath, but didn't shatter his body on impact (which was, after all, the point), and lay there trying to rid himself of the hitch in his chest. His head was unhappy about the further abuse, to say the least, but he forced himself to his feet.

He wearily climbed the steps, and found that he couldn't open the heavy wooden doors. It likely took magic to do so, he thought, and nearly cried with frustration over his broken wand. So close to his goal, but his body was failing him badly. He pounded his flat palms against the wood. To his surprise, one of the doors opened, and a crabby-looking old man poked his head out, holding up a lantern in one crabbed hand.

Harry said something, but the man's face showed no comprehension. He giggled drunkenly when he realized he'd spoken in Portuguese.

"What's all this?" he snarled. "There's enough people destroying the other side of the school without you foreign students getting lost and tearing up this side!" He hauled Harry in with one hand gripping the shoulder of his shirt and the other holding the swinging lantern. "Causing trouble," he grunted, and left Harry there without another word, turning and hobbling away, the light in his hand swaying against the walls of the huge corridor.

"Wait!" Harry called out (in English, he was sure) but the man didn't wait. So Harry was forced to walk further into the school, following the source of the cacophony of shouting, singing, laughing, and so forth. He suddenly realized what he'd walked in on. The final task had been tonight, and whoever had won the Tri-Wizard Cup was celebrating.

How strange. How strange that it's me, finally coming home, that has to give them the news that will make all this meaningless. They've forgotten about me, I'm sure, after all this time. They're happy, celebrating this tournament. And I've killed them. I've killed everyone, because I came back. Voldemort was waiting for me, wanted me, to do that ceremony, when they've forgotten about me. They won't be

happy to see me now I've returned and doomed them all. Sirius . . . have I killed him, too?

He found himself standing at the head of a flight of stairs. The stairs were dark, lit only at the top by the raucous good cheer of the upper level. He wondered where they led to. But there was a figure coming up the steps, moving slowly. Some kind of mutant or magical creature or . . . no, a person, carrying another person. How strange. A man, painfully climbing the stairs, out of breath, with a limp body cradled in his arms. Harry stared at them as they came. Had he killed someone already?

It was a girl. He couldn't see her face, for her thick spill of long brown hair was covering it and flowing over the man's arms. There was a dark glistening in the hair, a place where it was matted, and Harry knew she was bleeding. The man who carried her must be a professor at the school, Harry thought, with his formal, black clothing. He had a shock of greasy-looking hair and a large nose, and his pale face would normally be unpleasant, Harry thought, but for the look of tender concern on it as he looked down on the girl in his arms. He stopped for a moment near the top, touched a few fingers to the blood in her hair, and his face grew twisted and enraged. He finally mounted the top stair, and was met by Harry, standing there uselessly and swaying with weakness.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked in a voice of terrible, cold anger. Harry had already faced Voldemort this evening, he wasn't afraid. "Aren't you interested in Diggory's noble victory?"

A more sarcastic question, Harry did not think he'd ever heard, though the bit of information provided was helpful. So the Hogwarts champion had won. "No, not really," he said, in his best imitation of Australian drawl. He wasn't ready to declare himself just yet.

"Just as well, there's been enough . . ." he looked down at the girl in his arms, "high spirits tonight." Then he suddenly seemed to realize that Harry was not his student, not from Beauxbatons or Durmstrang, and he had no reason to be in the school. He gave him a closer look, and frowned deeply.

“What’s happened?”

“I hate to say this, but none of your business,” Harry replied, and met the man’s challenging eyes.

A look of frozen shock came over the man, and Harry didn’t know why. The mouth under that large nose opened, then closed without a sound. Harry felt a slight pressure, almost like a light breeze, over his mind, and was stunned by the man’s finesse. But he had too much practice not to notice at all, and he firmly closed his brain to the intrusion. The man looked even more shocked, and his frown cut deep grooves beside his mouth.

“You’re . . . not James,” he said with difficulty.

Harry took a step back, almost as shocked as the man he faced.

“You are Harry Potter,” he said in a voice little over a whisper. Harry honestly could not tell what the man’s emotions were at that point, but he was too busy being alarmed over the man’s words to worry about his mood.

“How do you know that?”

“Your eyes . . . her eyes . . .”

The man abruptly seemed to shake it off. “I will take this girl to the hospital wing, and you will accompany me until I can escort you to the headmaster’s office, do you understand?”

It’s Snape. Sirius told me about him. Severus Snape, who loved my mother and obviously still does. Her eyes, honestly. He thought it might be a bad idea to voice that aloud, so he focused on the more important point. “Oh, thank all the gods,” Harry sighed. “I just got here and I didn’t know how to find him.”

He took a step to follow the man and nearly fell over. Snape, who apparently did not miss a thing even while heavily preoccupied, snapped, "Keep up!" without so much as turning around.

"I'm trying," Harry said raggedly. "I've lost a lot of blood, you may have noticed."

"All the more reason to get to the hospital wing in a hurry, wouldn't you say?" the professor replied, silky smooth. Harry was amused; he could almost like a man of such self-assurance that he could be sarcastic at a time like this.

He followed the man through the twisting routes of the school and they arrived at the hospital wing quickly, Harry following closely on Snape's heels more in worry that he'd pass out and Snape wouldn't notice than that he wouldn't be able to find another guide to his destination.

The woman who met them at the door gasped in shock, her face going pale. "I've just finished treating Miss Delacour, and a girl who was burned by some illicit fireworks, and now what has happened?"

Snape's face was grim. "She was attacked, Madam Pomfrey, rather viciously. Not everyone is celebrating this evening."

The older woman's elegant fingers covered her mouth, her eyes betraying her sorrow, and she quickly directed Snape to lay the girl down in a bed.

"Who could have . . ."

"Do not ask me questions right now. I will speak to the headmaster first."

She suddenly seemed to notice Harry, and turned to him with abruptness, her mood becoming business-like as she realized what a wealth of patients she had.

"And what has happened to you, young man?"

“I don’t know what led to his injury,” Snape began, “but you can see that he has been bleeding severely from his arm and, unless I miss my guess, his head has sustained—”

“It’s nothing that can’t wait,” Harry interrupted briskly, still affecting the drawl. “I need to see the headmaster immediately. If you wouldn’t mind?” he said to Snape, raising his eyebrows and putting on a modicum of deference. The man was an adult and reputedly on his side of the fight now, after all.

“If you believe you will arrive at the headmaster’s office still in possession of your faculties,” Snape returned.

“I think I’m the best judge of whether or not I can wait a few minutes for medical attention. I need to speak to him—without delay.”

Snape sneered, but led Harry out without any further arguments (or, miraculously, smart remarks), while Madam Pomfrey’s protests that he must be examined immediately rang in their ears. Harry followed him just as closely as before. His breathing became ragged as he continually fought off nausea and shivering fits.

“Your desire to see the headmaster is, I presume, an errand to give or gain some information on the Dark Lord?”

“What leads you to that assumption?”

“Your mind is not as closed to me as you would like to believe,” the teacher answered softly, but his right hand began to rub his left forearm, an action Harry found highly suspicious. Nevertheless, he redoubled his guard on his thoughts, becoming increasingly aware that he was in the presence of an accomplished Legilimens whose years of experience had likely given him skills far exceeding Harry’s own, mainly self-taught, abilities.

They arrived at the gargoyle, Snape spoke to it, and Harry made no effort to hear what Snape said past the ringing in his ears. He wearily ascended yet another set of stairs, licking his lips and finding them

cold. He knew he should have accepted help from Madam Pomfrey while he'd been there, but what had taken place tonight couldn't wait for morning. By the time he was treated, Pettigrew might have escaped from the house, for that matter.

They arrived at the door to Dumbledore's office, knocked, and entered without waiting for permission. Harry got the feeling this was Snape's normal method of entering, or doing most things for that matter. Quickly and with little regard for anyone's feelings.

As soon as Sirius saw him, he rushed forward, eyes wild, and grabbed Harry by the shoulders.

"Merlin, what's happened?"

"It was . . . well, there's a lot to explain. It was Voldemort."

Sirius sighed, and gripped his shoulders tight. "You're here, you're alive," he muttered huskily, then made a face of deepest disgust. "After an attack which Professor Dumbledore has just finished explaining could never have happened if I'd left you alone from the beginning."

"What do you mean?" Harry frowned.

"I mean you had magical protection while you were living with a relative of your mother's. Unfortunately, that's lost to us now." He gave Harry a slightly panicked look up and down. "And now this. I shouldn't have left you alone."

Harry grunted in disgust, unused to seeing Sirius as anything but the man in charge. He'd obviously been cowed in some way by Dumbledore, and one thing Harry never wanted to see in his life was Sirius cowed by anybody or anything—except Catalina, of course. And the silver-haired man in the half-moon spectacles was about the furthest thing from a Brazilian goddess that Harry had ever seen.

"So, what happened to you? It's always kind of been 'Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!' with you. Is giving the old guy your balls

the normal price of admission to his office or something?" he asked, his voice dripping with disappointment.

Interesting, though. Such is the headmaster's power. I need to remember that. I . . . He lost his train of thought in the confusion of his brain.

Sirius reared up in surprise, quick anger, which quickly dissipated and left him laughing despite the sight before him. His laugh was a little hysterical, granted, but Harry's words were a dash of cold water in his face. What was wrong with him? He'd so automatically reverted to believing that Dumbledore was in charge. What had happened to all his questions, all his misgivings? Harry brought them all back for him. It was seeing Harry's situation six years ago that had started him questioning the old man, and it was seeing Harry now that reminded him of who he'd become over the last six years. It was like they'd just said, only moments ago. He wasn't seventeen anymore. And who but him had given Harry the tools to make it this far?

Sirius turned to Dumbledore, his original attitude on entering the office reasserting itself. "He does have a point, sir," he shrugged. "I actually feel like I should apologize for letting you convince me so easily. Harry's safety is paramount to me, and it was his safety I was ensuring by taking him and giving him a loving home. I lost sight of that for a moment, but I won't again," he promised.

Harry was looking with pity over Sirius' shoulder at Dumbledore, who had stood up upon his entrance, but was quite still and apparently waiting his turn to speak. "You're trying to talk him into believing I'd rather be magically untouchable at the Dursleys, than with him and so far away as to be practically untouchable anyway? Got to give you credit for being original, headmaster."

Dumbledore's eyes were on Sirius, however, and the bright blue orbs were alight with some kind of humour. "No idea, indeed," he said softly. "Most unusual."

There was a snort of disbelief behind Harry. He turned and saw that Snape was standing rigid, his jaw locked tight, and staring at Sirius

with loathing. He recalled the antagonism between these two, but there was no time for that now.

“Snape could probably have told you this just as well as I could . . . seeing as how you read minds and everything, of course,” Harry said to the professor with syrupy sweetness, “but Voldemort’s come fully back. He’s taken my blood for a ritual and resurrected a real body. Lucky for everybody that my blood was so symbolic for him that he wanted to wait, I guess,” he added in a teasingly thoughtful, calm tone, “or he’d have just grabbed anybody who fought against him and done this the minute he had a servant to assist him. At least, that’s what he’s been saying all year.”

“How did he get hold of you?” Sirius demanded, shaking Harry’s shoulders a little. Harry couldn’t help but cry out in pain, and Sirius released him. “Harry, did you leave the house? Where did you go?”

Harry smiled painfully. “Peter Pettigrew came by and told me he was Arthur Weasley to get me to come with him. Obviously, I knew he wasn’t since I’ve always seen him in the dreams, but I invited him inside anyway so I could take him out. It’s good news, really, means Voldemort doesn’t know about the dreams, doesn’t know I’ve been able to see . . .”

The buzzing in his ears had gotten very loud. His vision was scattering into little motes of light and dark, so that he couldn’t even see the room anymore.

“So he threw a Portkey after me, but it’s okay, ‘cause I’ve got him all tied up at the house. Sirius, I got Pettigrew for you, you’ll be pardoned now . . .”

Still trying to talk, Harry fell over on the floor, his strength finally spent. As his vision and mind faded to black, he heard Snape’s haughty voice.

"Now you've heard the boy's report, I have to speak to you urgently, Headmaster."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Annoying sounds and something touching his cheek. A fly, a mosquito? He raised his hand to brush it away and gasped at the pain it caused.

“Wake up, child. Open your eyes and look at me.”

He recognized the sensation on his cheek as the palm of someone’s hand, and he grudgingly obeyed the insistent voice.

“What?” he whispered hoarsely, wishing that looks could kill, because the old lady would be dead meat.

“What is your name?”

His stomach jerked in alarm, and he remembered why his arm hurt. He’d been captured again, looked like. He was lying in the dark, helpless under this woman’s watch, and they wanted to interrogate him for some reason.

“Evan,” he whispered stubbornly, resolved that even under torture he would maintain the persona of an unremarkable wizard from Australia.

“Very good. What day is it?”

He looked at her askance. “How should I know?” he said, still whispering from the huskiness of sleep. “How long have I been here?”

“Relax, Mr. Rivers, I’m only checking on your head injury. Your father says you came here for help when you tripped and fell down the stairs at home. Is that right?”

“Oh, I remember you,” he said with a relief that spread warmly through him, washing away that pinched feeling in his stomach. “I’m at Hogwarts. I can’t remember your name.”

“It’s Pomfrey, Mr. Rivers. How did you injure your arm?”

“Don’t remember,” he grunted, and turned on his side, cradling his expertly-bandaged arm against his chest. “My head’s fine, I’m going back to sleep.”

“Let me see your pupils.”

“In the morning.”

He was already drifting away again, the guttering candle and the woman who held it above him already half-forgotten.

He heard someone talking, and he slowly swam up out of the fog of sleep. He could tell even before he opened his eyes that it was daylight. There was only one woman whose voice he’d ever heard while in bed, and he wondered why Anna was trying to talk to him while he was asleep. He reached out to put an arm around her, to show her that he didn’t regret it and that she was worth it. . . He encountered not her wonderful, warm curves, but an expanse of empty blanket, and then his hand touched cold metal.

His eyes sprang open. His hand was gripping the frame of the small hospital bed he was laying in, and sunlight was spilling in through tall, lead-paned windows wrought in fanciful designs. He reached for the side of the bed to get his glasses, but they weren’t there. He frowned, but they were nowhere about him. He squinted, trying to see the rest of the room. There was a whole row of empty beds stretched out in front of him, and he turned over on his other side, expecting to groan in pain but pleasantly surprised by the state of his arm. Looking the other direction was an occupied bed, over which Madam Pomfrey was standing and conversing with her patient, a girl with flaming red hair. Behind them was a door which led, Harry was certain, to the supply room and possibly to the lady’s personal quarters, and also a wide pair of double doors which were the exit from the infirmary, if he was remembering correctly.

“Ah, look who’s awake,” Pomfrey said cheerfully, stepping away from the boy in the other bed to come to his side. “Well, let’s have a look at you.”

“I feel great,” Harry protested, trying to fend her off. He didn’t need anything, he did feel wonderful compared to last night. He didn’t think he was one hundred percent, but he’d definitely been given a perfectly-made Blood Replenishing Potion sometime during the night that had invigorated him, and the lump on the back of his head had all but disappeared—a minor miracle after getting tossed up against the tombstone like that. “I’m fine.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” she retorted, and used her wand to give him a thorough examination. Her eyebrows flew up toward her hairline alarmingly. “I suppose you are. Very well, Mr. Rivers, I shall release you this very afternoon when I am sure that your head injury has left no lasting damage.”

“What about me?” the girl in the other bed objected.

“You sustained a very ugly burn from your brother’s firework, Miss Weasley, and you should be very grateful that I’ve managed to replace your skin at all,” Pomfrey said, pressing her mouth into a thin line of intimidation. It had no obvious effect, since the girl simply raised one eyebrow and thinned her mouth right back. Pomfrey threw up her hands and sighed. “You may go this afternoon as well, Miss Weasley, and next time have a care around those rascals.”

Harry was surprised to finally meet a member of the English contingent of the Weasley clan. He was very hesitant to mention his acquaintance with her brothers until he had a chance to speak to Sirius and figure out what their story was to be. Had Pettigrew been captured, or had he escaped? Were they coming out with their true identities? Best keep his mouth shut. In fact, he’d better not even mention his missing glasses until he knew why they were missing.

He irritably flicked hair out of his eyes, and suddenly realized that his hair was several inches longer than it had been last night. It was hanging in a shaggy fringe around his face, and his hand stopped.

Best not to move it. Someone had grown it last night, for a very specific purpose. He stealthily let his hand creep under the hairline, and realized that it was covering his scar. He held a piece of the shaggy overhang out away from his forehead. Sandy, pale brown. Of course. Sirius' hair would likely be the same colour. This was the disguise, and he'd better not ruin it by flicking it out of his eyes and revealing the scar it covered to everyone.

When Madam Pomfrey had disappeared into the supply room, clucking and muttering to herself, the girl in the other bed turned to Harry and made a face, then grinned.

"So, I hear you and your father are from Brisbane," she said with enthusiasm. "Whatever made you decide to move so far? Weren't there any teaching positions in Australia for him?"

Harry thought fast. It looked like he wouldn't get a chance to speak with Sirius first, but it was obvious that he'd made the right decision when he'd acted as Evan Rivers. It didn't seem to be their normal story of travelers looking for a home, however, it seemed like Sirius had spread around that they were actually Australian.

"Oh, you know, we needed a change," he said, trying to sound casual. He kept Anna's face before him, remembering her giggles as he carefully taught himself to copy her speech patterns and rhythms. It was hard with hair tickling his forehead. He'd never let his hair go this neglected before.

"Did you really fall down the stairs last night?" she asked. "You must be awfully clumsy."

"Not normally," he said, trying to maintain his casual tone despite the sickness that gripped him when he thought about last night. "I was trying to put my things in the new bedroom and I couldn't see where I was going."

He sat up cautiously, and looked around the otherwise deserted infirmary. "Where's that other girl?"

“What other girl?”

“The one who was brought in last night injured. I thought she’d been attacked or something. She had all this brown hair going everywhere . . .”

“Oh, yeah.” The Weasley girl sounded subdued. “Her parents came to get her this morning and take her out of here.”

“Who is she?”

“She’s in my house, Gryffindor House. You do know about the houses, don’t you?”

“Of course,” he said, impatient to hear the rest.

“Her name is Hermione Granger. Last night . . . I’m not sure what happened, since I only know from trying to eavesdrop on what Madam Pomfrey was telling her parents, but I know it was Viktor Krum.”

“Krum?” Harry said in disbelief, thinking back to the teenager he remembered from the Quidditch match in Bulgaria. He’d known Krum was the Durmstrang champion, but it slipped to the back of his mind at this point. He hadn’t been overwhelmingly interested in the Tournament.

“He was awfully disappointed about losing the Tournament, of course, and I know Granger went off to comfort him, they’ve been sneaking around with each other all year. He must have . . .” The Weasley girl trailed off, seeming uncomfortable now. “You know. Taken it out on her. She’s from Hogwarts, after all. And she hasn’t anybody to look out for her, her parents are Muggles and everything.”

“Who bloody cares?” Harry growled, feeling inexplicably outraged. He kept remembering her limp body in the arms of the professor, the blood in her hair and the paleness of her skin. “She shouldn’t need looking after, Krum had no right.”

Surprised by his vehemence, she didn't argue.

"Professor Snape was the one who found her. What did he do to Krum? Did you hear anything about that?" Remembering the look of anger on Snape's face, he was willing to believe that Snape had left the boy tied up in his own entrails, at the very least. He'd been totally enraged at such a thing happening in his school.

"I don't know," she shrugged. "I hope it was something awful. I mean, really awful. You're right, he should have never—well. There's nothing really to say unless we know more about it."

Harry was beginning to feel guilty for talking about it at all, so he gave over and laid back in the bed with a sigh. He wanted his spectacles back, already. He wished Sirius would get his ass in here and explain what was going on. Pettigrew must have escaped again, that's the only reason for the Rivers story. I should have taken more precautions . . . but I didn't. What's that phrase about spilt milk? Harry knew that without Pettigrew to prove Sirius' innocence, things were going to be very hairy around here. Who knew what they'd say about Harry's survival? Maybe they'd say that Sirius had him trained up as a Death Eater?

The large door of the entrance opened, and he sat up in anticipation. A spill of red-haired teenagers poured through the door, and he lay back with a sigh. He was feeling perfectly well enough to leave, and he had half a mind to sneak out and go look for Sirius, since Sirius was not altogether concerned about him. But Madam Pomfrey rushed out flapping her starched white apron at the intruders, and Harry knew he'd never make it past her eagle eye.

"Ginny!"

"Aw, Gin, you're all right!"

"What're they keeping you in here for, you look fine to me!"

“All right, all right, miss, just keep your hair on!” one of the stocky, freckled twins turned and barked at Madam Pomfrey.

“We’re only here to see our sister, after all!” the other twin added with an offended air.

“Crabby old besom,” muttered the tall, lanky one.

The girl looked surprised and pleased to see them, but her tone of voice was cool and haughty.

“Wouldn’t even be in here if it weren’t for you, would I?”

“Aw, Gin, don’t be like that,” one of the twins muttered.

“We told you not to hold it like that, didn’t we?”

“And we’re the ones facing a summer’s worth of grief from Mum on McGonagall’s request, not you.”

“You’ll get your every whim catered to for weeks until you’re tired of milking her,” added the youngest one, half under his breath but perfectly audible to Harry, since he was standing closest to Harry’s bed.

“Only two visitors to a patient!” Madam Pomfrey insisted, still hovering around their edges. She was obviously very nervous about the damage a host of Weasleys could inflict on the hospital wing, Harry thought with amusement, and likely making up this rule on the spot. After the letters back and forth with Charlie and the stories he’d heard, he was fairly sure she had good cause to worry. “One of you will have to go!”

The three boys all looked at each other with calculating expressions, then one of the twins said, “Right, okay,” and turned around to face Harry. “Congratulations, you’ve got a visitor.”

Madam Pomfrey would have started shrieking, but Harry just grinned and held out his hand to shake, still marveling at his ability to use it

despite his knowledge of magical medicine. He'd never had to see its results on himself before.

"Evan Rivers," he drawled. "Which one are you?"

"Heard of us, have you?" the twin said with satisfaction, pretending to polish his fingernails on his shirt. "I'm Fred."

"You build fireworks?"

"Prototype," Fred shrugged. "Very early stages, of course, and we hope to have much better products in the future. Hence the injuries," he added, nodding toward Ginny's bed.

"Sweet," Harry said, a Johnny-ism he'd never gotten rid of. "Must have been a lot of work."

"We're no strangers to hard work, when the occasion calls for it." He wiggled his eyebrows. "Don't tell the professors."

Harry grinned, and stretched his shoulders lazily. "Me? Never."

"So, where d'you come from? You're not from Hogwarts."

"Oh, that's my new friend, the world's biggest klutz," Ginny called out from the next bed before Harry could respond. "He and his dad just got here from Brisbane, I guess his father's taking over for Moody next year."

This was news to Harry, but he just smiled with confidence.

"You'll be attending Hogwarts in the fall, then? What year are you?"

Harry's smile wanted to fall, but he didn't allow that to happen, still trying to project a carefree attitude. "My father and I haven't really finished talking about that yet," he said, a statement that seemed safely devoid of commitment to any plan of action. Where in Merlin's name was Sirius?

As if Harry had reached out and called him there, Sirius opened the door and strolled in.

“There you are,” Harry said.

“Oh, good, you’re awake,” Sirius said cheerfully—sticking as closely as possible to a Brisbane accent as he could manage, and Harry figured he was probably the only one in the room who’d be able to tell the difference. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m just fine, Father,” he growled, reaching a hand up under his shaggy hair to scratch irritably at his forehead, pointedly drawing attention to the new hairstyle.

Sirius rolled his eyes. “You can get all upset about being stuck in the infirmary later, we’ve got things to do right now. Besides, you can hardly blame me for keeping busy ensuring your future happiness, can you?”

Harry snorted. “You make it sound like you’ve been arranging my marriage.”

Sirius grinned at him. “Evan, you may not like this, but I have to tell you something . . .”

Harry threw his pillow at him. Sirius caught it one-handed and nearly swung it back, then realized he was being watched by four sets of interested eyes, not to mention one pair that were anxious to see that the patient’s healing was not interrupted by boyish gestures out of grown men. He set the pillow on the end of the bed, and held out his hand to Harry.

“Come on, up you get,” he said briskly—his voice, affected by the audience, sounding very, very English. “You’ve got to go see the headmaster and talk about a few things.”

Oh, a few things? Harry thought to himself, but couldn’t blame Sirius for keeping what those things were to himself at the moment. Still, he stifled laughter as he allowed Sirius to pull him to his feet. He did something he had attempted but rarely in the past, hoping it would

work. He sent into Sirius' mind a flash of what he himself was seeing—or rather, not seeing. Sirius grunted in surprise and waved a hand in front of his face. There was nothing wrong with Sirius' eyes, of course, and Harry had only sent out the briefest moment, so he recovered quickly. He looked at Harry, who crossed his arms over his chest and waited for some kind of explanation.

“Come on,” Sirius said, and put a hand on his back to guide him out the door. Harry snagged his shirt from the cart at the end of the bed and pulled it on. Since he'd only been dressed in a pair of loose fleece pants that he recognized as his own, he'd been feeling the need for more clothing in the presence of strangers. Putting on the shirt made him feel better, and he recognized it as one that had been in his backpack on the plane. Sirius had obviously been back at the house.

“Here,” Sirius said, taking Harry's glasses out of his shirt pocket and slipping them to Harry. “Put them on, but let's not run into anybody on the way to the office, if we can help it.”

“Part of the disguise?”

“Yup. Dumbledore and I talked about it—argued about it, really—for a good hour, but we finally think we've got something. The younger students aren't likely to know what you're supposed to look like, they've forgotten if they did know, and some minor changes should be good enough for the older students. The adults are pretty much on our side, so they'll be doing what they can to help, not to expose us.”

“I take it this means I'll be attending here in the fall?”

Having been from the hospital wing to Dumbledore's office just the night before, Harry nevertheless was unsure of himself and allowed Sirius to lead the way. Sirius turned toward him to answer.

“Yes. That was part of the reason I was ready to come back, we talked about this. You've got to get formal schooling and certification if you're to have any future. But with the colour of your hair, which will be easy to maintain in secret, and the length, which will be a much

less conspicuous way to cover the scar around your dormitory than makeup, although more chancy—”

“And I’ll be getting contact lenses this summer, I take it?”

Sirius shrugged helplessly. “It’ll make you look less like James and Lily. We’ll take what we can get. This is a temporary solution at best.”

“How are we going to make it seem like I’m just some random student that’s going to be attending here, conveniently arriving in the country just when Harry Potter did?”

“Nobody knows Harry Potter is anywhere, at the moment.”

“Except Voldemort and his followers.”

“Yes, except Voldemort. But I’ll let Dumbledore explain why he’s likely to keep quiet about it for a while, as well as how it will be to our benefit when word does get out. I’d like your input on that before we come to any final decisions, anyway. You’ve got just as much say in this as anyone, and Merlin knows you’ve got plenty of insight. This comes to nothing if you don’t like it.”

“Dumbledore say that?”

Sirius grinned, and Harry thought of the sharp canine teeth of his Animagus form at that moment. “No, I did. Dumbledore will live with it. You’re not his godson.”

“True. Thankfully. Hey, does this mean you didn’t catch Peter? He got away?”

A truly dangerous look came over Sirius, but he shook his head. “No. We’ve got him. He did turn into a rat and slip your ropes, of course, but Kreacher had to obey you, so he couldn’t open the door and let him out. What did you do with his wand, by the way?”

Harry thought back over the previous night and tried to penetrate his fuzzy mental state and faulty memories. "Uh . . . I think it's in the bushes by the front door."

"Oh, great, we'll get it later. Anyway, being a rat was really his only way of escape. I was anticipating it, and I Apparated inside so he wouldn't have a way to slip out while I was coming in. I forced him back into human form and the headmaster and I escorted him to jail."

"The Ministry knows you're innocent? You're pardoned?"

Harry was ready to gush enthusiastically over the great news, but something in Sirius' face stopped him.

"Sort of. It's a little bit complicated."

"What?"

"I'm not here," Sirius explained slowly. "Because if I were here, you would be here."

"So?"

Sirius stared at him, puzzled. "Isn't that how you want it? I'm trying my best to keep your identity secret because I knew you'd want to keep a low profile. I mean, at least for a little while, until we can figure out what's going on in this country and where Voldemort's strengths are. Public opinion isn't something I wanted you to have to deal with right now."

Harry was surprised, but he shouldn't have been. Sirius always thought of him first, and always took the course of action that he thought would be best for Harry. "You're right," he said, but slowly and carefully as he thought about it. "It is what I want, and you're right about needing to get a handle on things first. Secrecy is good. I need press coverage like I need a case of boils." Those were not pleasant. Ugh. Damn Sascha straight to hell for his damned experimental lessons.

It was then that Sirius and Harry figured they should stop whispering in the corridor and should actually ascend to Dumbledore's office. Anything from this point on was better hashed out between all three of them, behind closed doors.

"I have made contact with everyone," Dumbledore said with no preamble when they entered the office. Harry was taken aback, although he maintained a serene exterior, but Sirius didn't miss a beat.

"Everyone alive, you mean."

"Yes, of course," Dumbledore said with perfect politeness despite the tactless comment. The beautiful bird that sat on its perch in front of him let out a trilling noise of disapproval, one gleaming eye fixed on Sirius. "There are not so many of us left as I would like," he admitted quietly, one hand stroking the bird. "But what remains of the Order has been recalled."

"I take it new recruits are pretty high on the priority list," Sirius said, taking a chair calmly. Harry remained standing. He wasn't nearly sure enough of himself yet.

"It will have to be."

The bird, preening its vibrant feathers, trilled again, much more softly, rubbing its head against Dumbledore's hand.

"Alastor is already thinking along those lines. He tells me there are promising young Aurors that he must speak to immediately."

"How are we going to do this?" Harry said, feeling as though he were interrupting, but he was feeling lost in what promised to be an intricate plan. "How are you going to convince people that Voldemort's in power, without me?"

"Without you?" Dumbledore repeated, sounding surprised.

“I mean, if I’m supposedly not here, then I can’t have been the witness to all of it, and it will be very hard to get people to believe what happened without a witness.”

“You’re right,” Sirius spoke up, “and the headmaster doesn’t like it, but that’s the way it’s going to be. You’re still dead, I’m still a fugitive, and Evan Rivers and his father are joining Hogwarts. It’s what’s best for us, right now. It will make it more difficult to get people to believe they are needed in the fight against Voldemort, but we’ll manage.”

“What about Neville Longbottom?” Harry asked quietly. “Does he know about the prophecy?”

“He knows some,” Dumbledore said, looking stunned that Harry had thought of the other boy. “I have spoken with him. He is determined to continue in his role as long as is needed. He does not know that you have returned, he will believe you are what you say you are.”

This is not going to end well, Harry thought, with a sense of doom. When the shit hits the fan . . . oh, boy.

And he determined, very privately and without meeting either man’s eyes, that he would talk to Neville himself. The two of them would have a conversation about this. When Harry met him, and had a chance to gauge him, he would tell Neville the truth. But there were more pressing concerns at the moment.

“How long is this alias going to last? And isn’t the Ministry involved, if Pettigrew is under arrest? Somebody there has got to know about all this.”

“You’re right,” Dumbledore said slowly. “There are a few people who are aware of the whole truth, but most simply know that Peter Pettigrew framed Sirius Black and has been captured at last. That you and Sirius have arrived in the country is being kept very quiet.” His face made it clear how unhappy he was about all this. He knew there was no way for this to end well, just as Harry was thinking. He didn’t like it at all. And Harry knew that he’d set this all up because Sirius had threatened to yank Harry back out of the country and

disappear again. Not that it was likely to work as well the second time, but it would waste months that ought to be spent subverting Voldemort's influence. This was the way to ensure their cooperation. Harry had mixed feelings about that. It was a little bit irrational of Sirius to think that what was best for them was more important than what was best for the country, but he understood. And he couldn't ask Sirius to change his mind, because he didn't want to. The idea of simply declaring himself and stepping out into the public eye made him feel queasy, and he knew he preferred it this way.

"What about Voldemort?"

Dumbledore's lips thinned. "He will keep quiet, for now."

"Why?"

"Because he will be wondering why we have chosen this path. He will think we have a much more elaborate plan than we truly do, and he will be waiting for us to show our hand, while he works behind the scenes to understand this. It will serve him to have the world believe that things go on as normal, you see. It is in his best interests for the public to believe he has not returned, so he may gain power in secret. He will allow your presence to go unremarked, for now, so that he can rebuild and try to discover what we are doing."

"I see. That makes sense," Harry admitted, thinking he'd better pay a lot more attention to his dreams, assuming he would still have them after last night. There had been nothing plaguing him during his stay in the infirmary. He could only hope—but maybe it would be better if he did dream. He could help them stay connected. "And the Ministry?"

"Has its own designs," Dumbledore muttered.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sirius spoke up, having been content thus far to let Harry and Dumbledore work things out.

"It means they are negotiating with me. We have not reached a decision just yet."

“A decision about what?”

“Their eyes on this school,” he said, smiling painfully. “We shall see. Now, Harry, you must pardon my manners, I have not introduced you! This is Fawkes, my phoenix. Fawkes, meet young Harry Potter.”

“Um, pleased to meet you,” Harry said uncertainly, trying to remember if he’d ever studied phoenixes. Maybe it was time for him to get back into school.

“So, you’re going to be teaching here, huh? No big change there, but I guess you’ll have to have some more complicated lessons than you’re used to. I’ll have to take your class, I guess.” Harry looked at Sirius, who was reaching for another sandwich off the plate they were sharing in Dumbledore’s office while the venerable (alleged) leader of the Order of the Phoenix was at the Ministry engaged in further negotiations. “Isn’t the Defense position supposed to be cursed?”

“Well, yes,” Sirius admitted through a mouthful of sandwich. He swallowed. “But we’ll see about that.”

Harry was working on his sandwich very absentmindedly, more busy thinking over everything that was happening today; the plans they were making preoccupied every spare brain cell. It’ll all fall apart, he kept thinking. It was morose, but he couldn’t get rid of it. This plan was full of holes, and it wouldn’t last long. But maybe it will last long enough for us to strike back. He was certain that Dumbledore and Sirius were thinking the same thing, and he really doubted anyone outside of the three of them knew everything. We all know it won’t work for long, and we’re all just hoping it’ll work long enough to be of some use to us. We’re keeping Voldemort from making any dramatic moves, we’re keeping ourselves as safe as possible in disguise at Hogwarts, and then there’s the Ministry . . .

“What about your pardon?” Harry asked suddenly.

“What about it?” There was a shifty look in his godfather’s eyes.

Harry sighed. "Whatever it is, tell me."

Sirius sighed back, and took the folded-up newspaper off Dumbledore's desk. He unfolded it and handed it to Harry. Harry was shocked, and taken aback. The front page screamed Pettigrew's arrest in huge block letters, and the photograph showed the scruffy man trying to duck away from the camera with nervous twitches.

"Um, so I guess we went public with that," he said slowly, scanning the article. "And they're begging you to come home and tell them where I am?" He looked up. "How is this good for our disguise?"

"Actually, it's perfect," Sirius said, and took another bite. Harry forgave him, he'd been busy all night taking care of things and he likely hadn't eaten since breakfast yesterday. Neither had Harry, for that matter, but he just couldn't find it in him to be very hungry in light of all this.

"I think I get it," Harry said. "If you're welcome to come home, there'd be no reason for you to be hiding under an alias. It will actually work in our favour." For a while.

"Mm-hmm," Sirius agreed, and took a huge swig of pumpkin juice. "I'd forgotten what the house elves' cooking was like here," he said with satisfaction, patting his stomach. "Not that I don't appreciate it when you do it," he added hastily.

"Likewise," Harry said with narrowed eyes, and took a much more leisurely sip of the coffee he'd requested to get himself going and rid himself of the fuzzy feeling in his mouth. "Are you in a hurry or something?"

"Yes. We've got an appointment with an optometrist, a Squib who owes Dumbledore a few favours."

Harry groaned. "Contact lenses?"

Sirius shrugged. "Brown ones."

“Brown?” Harry said, making a face. “I mean, I get the reason they can’t be green, but brown?”

“Is there something wrong with brown eyes?” Sirius asked.

Harry’s mind, with a life of its own, shot to the very pretty red-haired girl with the very awesome older brothers that he’d talked to this morning. The pretty red-haired girl with the pretty brown eyes.

“No, nothing,” he said.

This was a crappy plan, but he would get a chance to see what she looked like with his corrective lenses. Sirius gave him a questioning look, but Harry ignored it and went back to work on his sandwich. I’ll get to try out for the Quidditch team! I’ll finally get to play with other people! Maybe she plays Quidditch . . .

“It’s going to be a very trying summer,” Sirius said, changing the subject.

“Why’s that?”

“We’re going to be stuck in the house most of the time.”

Harry thought about Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. Cobwebs, dust, evil artifacts, depressing memories . . . plus a restless Sirius and a creepy house elf, loathing each other and probably not willing to sit down and talk about it.

“Capital,” Harry muttered. He reached for the coffee. He was going to need it.

A/N: This chapter turned out to be longer than I anticipated, but I'm sure you guys don't mind! I know that this chapter raises as many questions as it answers and that it leaves several issues still open, but don't worry! This is only the end of Book One, and there is plenty more to the story! I will start Book Two as soon as possible. Due to having been in a couple of summer classes, I haven't even started

writing Book Two yet, but it is fully outlined. I will start posting it as soon as I have a good set of chapters prepared.

A couple of things to say about this last chapter, just to head off a few comments . . .

I refuse to answer questions about any future romantic attachments Harry might have. You may speculate to your heart's content, but I will neither confirm nor deny.

I know Remus did not appear and there was no reunion between him and Sirius. It will happen very early in Book Two, so be patient. There was really no room for it here.

With that, this first book of The Wise One Trilogy is concluded. My many thanks to my many reviewers, who have made writing and posting this story so very enjoyable. Thanks to the 430 people who have chosen to call this story a favourite of theirs, and especial thanks to those who have made a point to review and tell me why. It's been loads of fun, and I hope you'll stick around for more! If you get really tired of waiting during the few weeks it's going to take me to prepare for Book Two, there's always my other series . . .

You've been wonderful. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Sincerely,

Faren